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PLAY

NO.1 FOR PS5

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→ HANDS-ON
MONSTER HUNTER WILDS
Epic clashes in Capcom's most dangerous world yet

→ FIRST LOOK
DYING LIGHT: THE BEAST
Kyle Crane returns in a new standalone adventure

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

BUILDING JAPAN How dynamic weather and shifting seasons completely upend the series

HANDS-ON WITH LIFE IS STRANGE: DOUBLE EXPOSURE

MONKEY BUSINESS? BLACK MYTH: WUKONG THE PS5 VERDICT

ACE ATTORNEY DEVS TALK ALL THINGS MILES EDGEWORTH

TOP 10 SAMURAI GAMES
From Onimusha to Ghost Of Tsushima, the greatest slash-'em-ups ranked

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INDIANA JONES AND THE GREAT CIRCLE
Xbox promises a quick PS5 release for its blockbuster

→ INTERVIEW
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Why community power is vital to the online Fallout's success

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Welcome

Like everyone else, I've been begging Ubisoft to take Assassin's Creed to Japan ever since finishing the first game. Now that dream is finally coming true, and while I might not be as young as I used to be, the evolving technology that sees this adventure landing on PlayStation 5 is probably for the best.

That jump forward in tech is all part of our look at Assassin's Creed Shadows (p52) in this issue, which sees us talking with art director Thierry Dansereau about bringing the devs' take on Japan to life. Not only does it look incredibly pretty, but some of those details have an effect on play, such as the changing weather and seasons giving you different opportunities for your sneaking and fighting.

Of course, Assassin's Creed isn't the only parkour-based series we're looking forward to returning. Dying Light: The Beast (p6) has been a pleasant surprise, what began as a piece of DLC for the second game coming to life as a fully standalone title featuring the return of the original game's hero, Kyle Crane.

Talking of blasts from the past – Fallout 76 (p10) is still going strong. The online game has been seeing a resurgence thanks to the success of the TV show, and we talk to the devs all about it and their upcoming big expansion in Milepost Zero. Facing quite the opposite problem is Borderlands 4 (p50), the announcement of which will hopefully detract from the awful movie that was just released.

We've returned from Gamescom with some fresh hands-on demos as well. Monster Hunter Wilds (p26) is living up to the hype as a genuine successor to Monster Hunter World. Meanwhile, Life Is Strange: Double Exposure (p30) truly feels like returning to the company of an old friend. Beyond that, the news that Indiana Jones And The Great Circle (p13) is already planning to hop to PS5 from Xbox isn't quite a surprise – but the confirmation is welcome nevertheless. We hope you enjoy reading about it all, and you really won't want to miss next month's landmark issue!

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GAME OF THE MONTH
The Case Of The Golden Idol
BEST NINJA
Yuffie (FFVII)

STAY UPDATED
SIGN UP TO
OUR WEEKLY
NEWSLETTER

THIS MONTH'S CREED CREW

Malindy Hetfeld
CONTRIBUTOR
Crossing blades in Onimusha and wits with Miles Edgeworth, Malindy remains indomitable.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Visions Of Mana
BEST NINJA
Ryu Hayabusa (Ninja Gaiden)

Jess Kinghorn
GAMES EDITOR
Still refusing to watch the Borderlands movie – Borderlands 4 could be the make-good needed.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Sam & Max:
The Devil's Playhouse
BEST NINJA
Kimberly (Street Fighter)

Miriam McDonald
OPERATIONS EDITOR
Wrangling games writers over the years means that Mim is already a dab hand when it comes to herding in Herdling.

GAME OF THE MONTH
SteamWorld Heist II
BEST NINJA
Jade (Mortal Kombat)

Milford Coppock
MANAGING ART EDITOR
Introducing him to the joy of the kanabo, Assassin's Creed Shadows may lead Milf (or the team, rather) down a dangerous path.

GAME OF THE MONTH
Star Wars Outlaws
BEST NINJA
Cyborg Raiden (MGS4)

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> Gamescom has never been E3, but it does a pretty good job of matching the excitement.

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Doctor Jones will see you now

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VR shooter Frenzies is a real blast

Dying Light: The Beast brings the original game's protagonist back to the limelight, although he's not exactly happy about it.

The Beast was freed at Gamescom

Catching up with the Dying Light: The Beast devs and more in Cologne, Germany

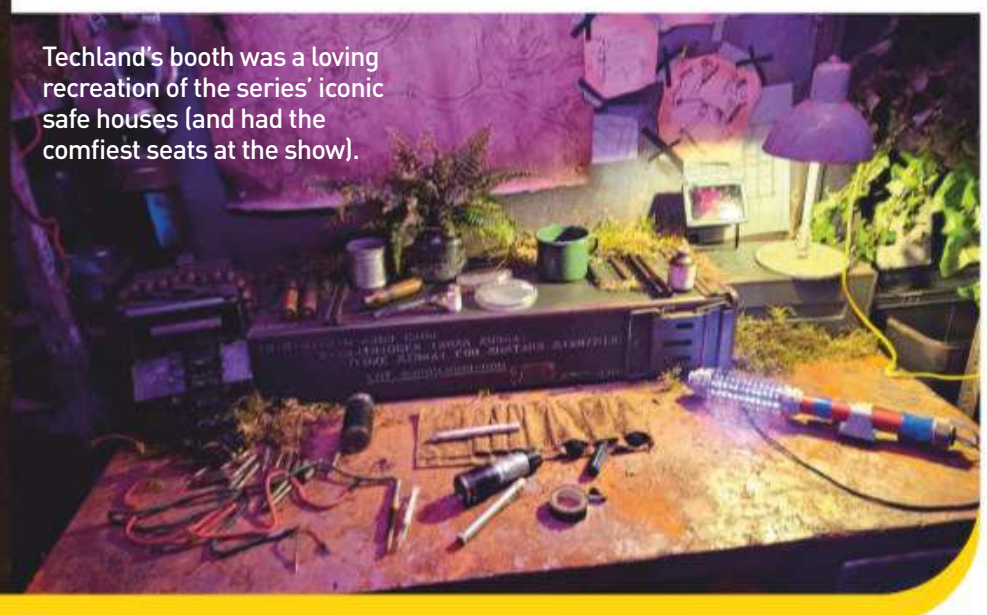
As we descended onto the Koelnmesse exhibition centre for yet another year of Gamescom, there was a sense of excitement in the air. This year, the event brought out heavy hitters like Capcom, Sega, Ubisoft, and that newly established PlayStation developer, Xbox. Gamescom might not be the mega-event that E3 was, but it does a great job of bringing mid-year excitement *and* of hawking litres of sparkling water.

Before the show floor opened on Wednesday, we were treated to another round of Geoff Keighley's Opening Night Live, which gave us a glimpse of some of the best and brightest games coming to PS5 over the next few years. The show kicked off with a teaser for none other than Borderlands 4, presumably to capitalise on this summer's blockbuster movie, which looks poised to be the biggest box office bomb of the year.

During the show we got new looks at the likes of Monster Hunter Wilds (a lot more on that on p26), Dragon Ball: Sparking! Zero, and Sid Meier's Civilization VII, as well as some new titles like Mafia: The Old Country, Goat Simulator: Remastered, and Masters Of Albion (Peter Molyneux returned from his crypt to present the latter). The biggest announcement of the night had to be one of the final ones: that Microsoft and MachineGames' Indiana Jones And The Great Circle will be arriving on PS5 in spring 2025, only months after its exclusive Xbox launch (flick to p13 to learn more about that).

However, the announcement that really caught our eye was the surprise reveal of a new Dying Light game, titled Dying Light: The Beast. Originally intended to be Techland's second DLC expansion for Dying Light 2, The Beast has grown legs of its own and become an 18-hour standalone game featuring the return of the original game's protagonist – although he's looking a little messed up. It was a great surprise and one that the crowd went wild for. Except for us; we knew about it as we had already been booked in to see a gameplay demonstration and interview the Techland team.

> This year, the event brought out heavy hitters like Capcom, Sega, and Ubisoft.



Techland's booth was a loving recreation of the series' iconic safe houses (and had the comfiest seats at the show).

BURY THE LIGHT

In our demo, Techland treated us to a look at 30 minutes of in-game footage in which we watched Kyle Crane (voiced by Sonic The Hedgehog himself, Roger Craig Smith) head back out into the zombie-filled world after being experimented on in captivity for a decade. Some time before the footage kicked off, Crane had escaped the facility and now – alongside his new handler, Olivia – he's venturing out into the

ULTIMATE MUSCLE

While The Beast has been upgraded from being released as DLC to a standalone title, owners of Dying Light 2's Ultimate Edition will get the new game for free – but that edition's being delisted on 30 September so buy it quickly!

world to have his revenge upon his captor, Baron. The demo opens with a sight that's pretty standard in Dying Light: massive buildings in a huge industrial area, ugly in themselves but beautifully lit. (In a series where the day/night cycle is crucial, a lot of attention is paid to the lighting.)

The game features all the crunchy combat, disgusting sound effects, and fantastic parkour mechanics that make the Dying Light series so memorable, including the grappling hook from the sequel; however, this adventure is set to take Kyle Crane into unexplored territory, with a large forest area being the centrepiece of both the trailer and the demo. Given that Crane's enemies this time are special forces-style opponents, there is also a lot more classic first-person shooting mixed into the action. Despite having some fresh abilities up his sleeve, Crane isn't overpowered this time around; in fact, his true beast-like power doesn't actually come out until he's firmly on the ropes against a hulking behemoth at the end of the demo, so rest assured, this won't be a cakewalk.

ZOMBIE NATION

When we spoke to Dying Light's franchise director Tymon Smektała and art director Katarzyna Tarnacka, both reiterated that bringing the series' original protagonist back into the fold was a big deal for the staff at the studio. Tarnacka told us that Dying Light: The Beast is her dream project and she wants to "focus on this and soak in every moment", while Smektała said this new tale had "remotivated us to work on Dying Light".

Motivation was a big factor in this game's existence, as it was born during a rough time for Techland. In late 2023, a mass of information leaked out about the second DLC expansion for Dying Light 2, including some story details, which led the team to entirely re-evaluate what they wanted to do with the project. However, once the idea of getting voice actor Craig Smith back as Crane was locked in, "everyone was extremely agitated" shared Smektała, but in a good way, with every department in Techland coming up with ideas for the grand reunion. By the end of the second week of work, things had grown so rapidly that the team had to say, "this is not DLC anymore".

Despite the fantastic demonstration, which featured gorgeous graphics and a nice helping of that sweet Dying Light parkour, our interview is what made us most excited about The Beast. The team at Techland are clearly full to the brim with passion and excitement to be creating this game and this story. Tarnacka went so far as to say she had goosebumps when she heard Craig Smith as Kyle Crane once again. From the sounds of things, Techland isn't in a rush to abandon the series any time soon. Although our suggestion of a Dying Light party game didn't seem to be what the developers had in mind for the next entry...

*** Dying Light: The Beast doesn't have a release date, but it looks pretty far along.**

> The team at Techland are clearly full to the brim with passion and excitement to be creating this game and this story.

All the high-flying parkour action Dying Light is known for returns in The Beast.

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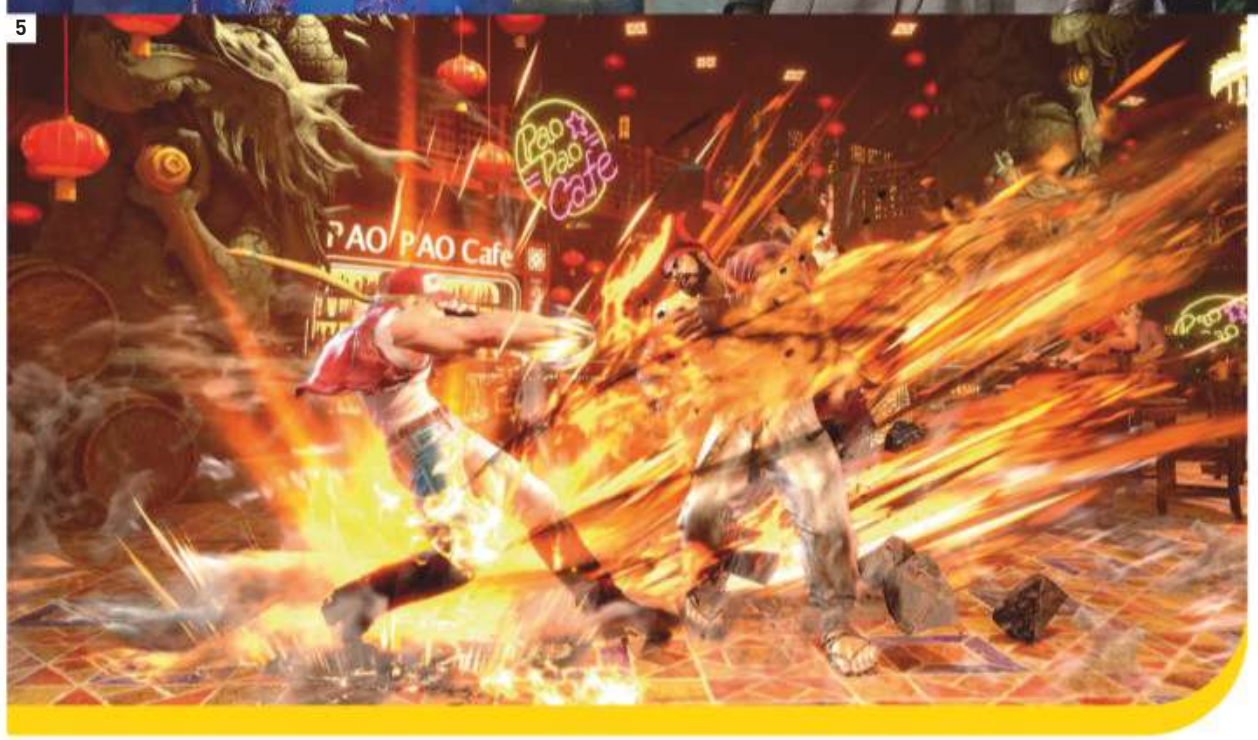


5

1 Monster Hunter Wilds continued to impress us when we saw it close-up – read more about it on p26. **2** Gamescom gave us our first look at Amazon's anthology TV series Secret Level – read our article on p12 and you'll be as excited as we are. **3** Indiana Jones And The Great Circle is coming to PS5 next year after a brief stint on Xbox. **4** Auld Doom Guy himself made an appearance, although his game didn't. **5** Terry Bogard's appearance in Street Fighter 6 was one of the highlights of our week.

1

PLAY INVESTIGATES

CAMP counselling

Fallout 76's creative director Jonathan Rush and lead producer Bill LaCoste discuss the Milepost Zero update

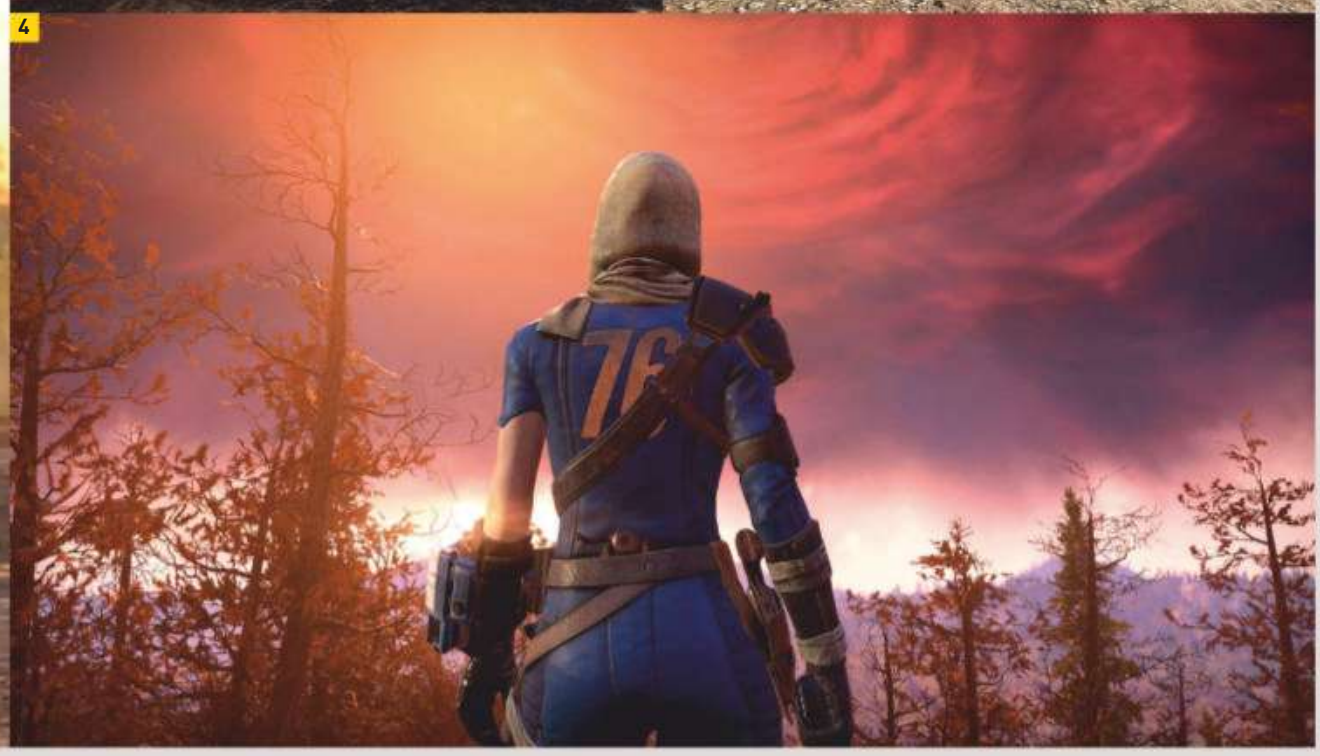
With Falloutmania strong after the success of a certain streaming show, the latest major update for 76 needs the strength of a super-mutant to carry expectations. Designed to reward existing players while smoothing the road in for new ones, all powered by six previous years of serving the community, it just might pull it off.

One addition is caravanning, making use of the recently added Skyline Valley area. "We wanted to keep the action going in that region by taking advantage of Skyline Drive, which kind of circumnavigates the whole new area," explains creative director Jonathan Rush. "Caravanning is something that's really a staple of Fallout, all the way back to Fallout 1. Fast forward to Fallout 76, and we have our own caravanning faction, the Blue Ridge Caravan. An update like this just made sense."

You'll get your own caravan outpost to manage, which you can develop with supplies from caravan runs (Rush likens it to expanding a house in Skyrim). Outposts also have unlockable vendors who will offer items for you and your CAMP that you won't be able to find anywhere else.

CAMP stands for Construction & Assembly Mobile Platform. Like any survival-flavoured MMORPG worth its scavenged salt, Fallout 76 has a base-building element, and players have shown enormous creativity over the years in what and how they build ("We've seen a couple of spaceships that people have created by building a whole bunch of different angles of glass and then destroying them and

1 You're going to have to make (and succeed at) caravan runs if you want to get that outpost you're working on beefed up. And to do that, you're basically taking a Brahmin for a walk. What can we say? We have zero complaints about that. 2 While you *can* go down the caravanning route solo, it's designed to be a way for people to come together. There's safety in numbers, after all. 3 We like to think those crates are full of treats for the Brahmin that we can reward it with at the end. Though it's probably just grateful to get some rest. 4 Skyline Valley, we're coming for ya.



building on top of them," says lead producer Bill LaCoste. "They've got a whole bunch of different techniques they use, it is really amazing stuff"). Did somebody build a replica Millennium Falcon? Absolutely. Did somebody else make an apocalyptic KFC? Of course. And now, thanks to Milepost Zero, these CAMP creations can be seen up close in-game.

BUILD GATES

"Best Builds," explains Rush, "is a way for our builders to show off the work that they've done. It's a way for people to visit other CAMPs and give them an upvote. CAMPs that get enough upvotes start to get featured on various worlds. [...] It's a bit of social glue, and a fun thing for our builders to engage in. It also gives us an avenue to, down the road, be able to host CAMP competitions right inside the game."

Best Build CAMPs won't have active vendors or resource gatherers (you're not being given any shortcuts!), but they're otherwise complete and free to explore. "The [building] system has expanded over the years," adds LaCoste. "Before, we would give a lot of walls and roofs and other pillars to help you create your CAMP from there. But we've also started issuing prefabs for bigger houses and things like that, that people can put immediately into their CAMPs. [...] We've expanded the system a lot, but also the *types* of CAMPs you're gonna see now. I think people are gonna be really amazed and surprised at some of those creations."

> **We've expanded the system [...] I think people are gonna be really amazed and surprised at some of those creations.**

If you're into Fallout for the violence, however, don't worry; you haven't been forgotten. Multiple enemies and combat overall have been given an overhaul, primarily focussing on damage-over-time effects. The crafting of Legendary items has also been examined closely, and given a significant shuffle.

ABSOLUTE LEGEND

"Now," says Rush, "when you scrap Legendary items, you get Legendary materials that you can use to create mods. When you get a weapon, for example, that's a three-star, and you want to replace one of the attributes, you can spend resources to remove one of those mods and place another in there. What's also kind of cool is that these mods can be sold or traded with other players."

"There was a lot of RNG in the previous system," LaCoste explains. "This new system allows you to use [any Legendary] weapon, and then deconstruct other weapons to get those Legendary mods, or the recipes for those mods, which you can then apply to that new weapon – getting the weapon you were ultimately wanting to get. It gives a lot more agency to players who are coming into the game that are also relatively new."

*** Milepost Zero is due to have hit Fallout 76 by the time you read this.**

MAXIMUM EFFORT
Love, Death & Robots creator Tim Miller co-founded Blur Studio, which has worked on many projects, in 1995, but he didn't make his feature-length film directorial debut until 2016 with smart-mouthed comic book actioner Deadpool.

PlayStation voices
The month in mouthing off

"I WILL OVERLOOK SHITTY GAME MECHANICS FOR HOURS IF I'M ENJOYING THE STORY. [...] I DON'T REMEMBER ALL THE RATS I FOUGHT IN TURN-BASED FALLOUT [...] BUT I REMEMBER STORY." JEFF GARDINER TELLS IT HOW IT IS.

"PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO BE SOLD HORSE ARMOUR ANY MORE. I CAN SAY THAT BECAUSE I WORKED AT BETHESDA." TIM WILLITS REFLECTS ON SPACE MARINE 2'S APPROACH TO MICROTRANSACTIONS.

"SOMETIMES I'LL EVEN JUST MAKE A SONG TO PROCESS EMOTIONS AND THEN SUDDENLY, OOPS, IT'S AN UNBEATABLE SONG BECAUSE WE'VE FOUND A WAY TO TIE IT INTO THE STORY." UNBEATABLE'S COMPOSER, CLARA MADDUX, ON CRAFTING BANGERS.

Another dimension, interplanetary

New game-based anthology show

Breathtaking? That remains to be seen, but maybe Secret Level will offer another reason to love your favourite videogame worlds.

Plenty of premises in the adult animated anthology Love, Death & Robots have had a videogame-y air: time loops; mech fights; special ops that go wildly off the rails – and that's just season one. Bearing that in mind, the creator's next project comes as no surprise. Secret Level is a series of 15 shorts each inspired by a different videogame series. Slated for an Amazon Prime Video premiere on 10 December, the series' creators hope to add another dimension to some of your favourites.

We've already seen Warhammer 40,000 Space Marines getting covered in bioluminescent goo, had a glimpse of the God Of War himself, and spotted at least one Armored Core pilot who's a dead ringer for Keanu Reeves (though full cast details have yet to be confirmed). Also set to enjoy an animated encounter are Sifu, Spelunky, and Concord (check out our review on p92). Don't tell our games editor, but even Dungeons & Dragons gets a look in.

Secret Level comes from Amazon MGM Studios and Blur Studio, which animated eight episodes across Love, Death & Robots' three series. Blur co-founder Tim Miller, is executive producer for these 15 fresh daydreams.

LEVEL UP!

Videogame adaptations have long had a bad rep. Because videogame stories are handcrafted to facilitate gameplay beats and mechanics, the transformation when that interactivity is taken away isn't always pretty. For one example as recent as this year, Eli Roth's big-screen take on Borderlands was both a critical and financial failure. However, there isn't much room in a less-than-20-minutes short to adapt a game's entire narrative arc and that brevity might just be Secret Level's, uh, secret weapon.

Rather than only playing the hits, Secret Level could seize the opportunity to develop a corner of the videogame worlds you already know and love. Just for a start, in Armored Core's world of mechs, what does it mean that Secret Level is choosing to focus on a human face? Will Secret Level reach out to touch on the squishy core at the centre of so many of that universe's mechanical monstrosities? Could this short offer a unique angle? If not, well, we're not exactly ones to say 'no' to another bout of scrapping metal either.

*** Secret Level loads onto Amazon Prime Video on 10 December.**

If Dial Of Destiny didn't do it for you, then MachineGames' take on the iconic archaeologist just might.

Whipping up a legend

Indiana Jones And The Great Circle coming to PS5

Picture this: a black screen, accompanied by a subtle yet instantly recognisable musical motif by John Williams, and then the title drop: Indiana Jones and the totally expected PlayStation release. That's right, Indiana Jones And The Great Circle is coming to PS5 during the spring of 2025.

That's a wee while after debuts on other platforms, but that brief window of exclusivity won't leave us envious for long.

Set in 1937, between Raiders Of The Lost Ark and The Last Crusade, The Great Circle sees Doctor Jones embarking on a quest to solve a totally original mystery. It's in development at MachineGames, the studio behind everything from 2014's Wolfenstein: The New Order to 2019's Wolfenstein: Youngblood, so you can expect plenty of first-person action.

Indy is fully equipped not only with his two fists for punching Nazis, but also his *brain*. On top of his arsenal of a loaded revolver and his trademark bullwhip, you'll also be juggling Indy's journal, snapping pictures with his camera, and hoovering up archaeological insights about your surroundings. Still, there are few things as satisfying as melee combat that sees you reeling in a fascist with your whip before punching their lights out.

Following a trail of clues, you'll venture from the Vatican in Rome to the Great Pyramids of Egypt, and explore the sunken remains of Sukhothai's temples in Thailand. Despite Indy's appearance, though, Harrison Ford is *not* along for the adventure, with actor Troy Baker instead bringing the iconic character to life.

Venture from the Vatican in Rome to the Great Pyramids of Egypt, and explore Sukhothai's temples in Thailand.

Indiana Jones And The Great Circle will launch on PS5 in spring 2025.

DEV ACCESS

Party shots

Near Light's Paul Mottram and Ben Hebb on making multiplayer shooters more accessible with **Frenzies** on PSVR2

With 25 years of experience in the industry, Near Light co-founders Paul Mottram and Ben Hebb had always agreed they would only make non-violent games, even at their previous studio, Wide Games, when they made the stealth-based World War II: Prisoner Of War on PS2. So it might come as a surprise that the studio's first game since being acquired by NDreams is Frenzies, a multiplayer VR shooter.

However, one look at the announcement trailer tells you it's a stark contrast from a typical military-themed FPS or even NDreams' own VR shooters. With bright colours and avatars running around in onesies, its vibe is more similar to Fall Guys'. "We try to make sure it's over-the-top, a bit like when shooting fruit," says Mottram, in reference to the studio's PSVR release Shooty Fruity, where you balance fending off sentient fruit with trying to check out at the supermarket. "When you shoot someone, they're ragdolling, so it has that comedy effect. The visuals, the colours, and the way we have sound effects are just to make you smile. We try to remove any level of brutality or nastiness, we don't want it to feel bad when you 'kill' someone."

> You play a round, you have a laugh about it, then you get back out there and do it again.

A more light-hearted feel isn't the only thing they want Frenzies to bring to the genre. While Mottram maintains it has a "serious edge", in the sense that it's competitive and will be rewarding for skilled shooters, one of the important design challenges is to lower the barrier of entry to make it accessible. "Back when you play what we now call 'boomer shooters', you'd just play, and now when you're playing Call Of Duty, you spend so long in a menu trying to configure your character and loadout, and then you go in and die after five seconds," Mottram explains. "What we wanted to do with Frenzies was just make something that's more frivolous, not the type of thing where you've got no chance of bringing it back, but have things that allow you to stay engaged and want to play with it instead of focussing on kill/death ratios."

Working out how to appeal to a non-core mass-market audience is nothing new for Mottram and Hebb; their prior experience includes working closely with the now-defunct Sony London Studio on its EyeToy Play and Singstar releases. This was when Wide Games became Kuju Brighton, later rebranded as Zoë Mode, the name change apparently because it wanted to project the image of a girl called Zoë "who loves to hang out on MySpace and plays SingStar". The tech, of course, also played a huge part in getting people who would otherwise feel uncomfortable holding a game controller to suddenly take part in something that felt intuitive.

"It's about creating believable actions," says Hebb, when speaking of EyeToy. "It was always about taking a player, putting them in a situation, and making them believe that they were doing it." You can say the same about VR – EyeToy's natural successor, where your hands are once more performing realistic actions inside a virtual world.

MASS MARKET EFFECT

That said, when it comes to gunplay, the developers are eschewing realistic actions for Frenzies, even if you can appreciate that kind of attention to detail in Pavlov or Resident Evil 4 VR when loading a firearm. "I just want to pick up a gun and shoot it, I don't want to spend ten minutes figuring out how you might load it," says Mottram. "We don't want an armoury for you to go to beforehand, you just pick up two weapons, then go for it and play."

Paul Mottram and Ben Hebb (centre, right) with NDreams boss Patrick O'Luanaigh (left).

To remind you not to take things too seriously, the weapons are deliberately comically oversized, and are automatically holstered when you're not using them. This in turn enables the more expressive side of the game – without a gun glued to you, you can use your hands to express yourself with gestures. "If you open the ability for people to express themselves visually, they start feeling that and it's really nice," Mottram explains. "You've got these controllers in your hands, so why not make the most of it?"

Perhaps more important is the party structure. Frenzies is (again comparable to Fall Guys) all round-based, with rules and even teams within in your group of 12 constantly changing. Meanwhile, between rounds, there's a social space where guns are disabled and you get to hang out all together before you're once again split into different teams. It's refreshing compared to the usual capture the flag slog, and that's how Mottram likes it: "You play a round, you have a laugh about it, then you get back out there and do it again."

Frenzies' release date is TBC; expect announcements from NDreams soon!

1 You can put up your hands to surrender, not that you'll necessarily be shown mercy. **2** You can point and shoot at the same time. **3** Quick respawns mean you won't need to feel bad for long.

Mechanics from other NDreams games, including Fracked's ziplines, feature here too.

1

PLAY INVESTIGATES

Booking in a redelivery

With Kingdom Come: Deliverance II, could Warhorse's historical RPG become the Czech Republic's Witcher?

You can't have a medieval RPG without a trebuchet, which Kingdom Come: Deliverance II brings up in its opening minutes, in the midst of a castle siege. It's a thrilling way to show how Warhorse's cinematic chops have developed over the past decade, all while committing to its vision of delivering a 'historically authentic' depiction of 15th-century Bohemia.

Mind you, just because there's a focus on realism – as in no dragons or magic – you'll still have to suspend your disbelief at times, such as when your protagonist Henry miraculously survives what should have been a fatal fall and merely loses a few levels of progression. History bods would probably also have rolled their eyes at his journey of social mobility in the first game, where he went from illiterate peasant to a knight – he's now serving under affable nobleman Hans Capon.

Nonetheless, as this lengthy prologue dials back a few weeks in the timeline from its explosive in medias res opening, we have time to acclimatise to the kind of roleplaying expected of us. That means not simply rushing for the cold steel whenever we encounter potential foes on the road, as often the right words can do the trick, though it's important to make sure our words match our appearance.

That's no issue when, as part of Hans' entourage, we make the journey to Trosky Castle to deliver a message to its lord, Otto von Bergow. That's also the perfect time for us to be eased naturally into KCD II's world, by engaging in a sparring

1 While you'll be in the midst of epic sieges – medieval Bohemia was not a peaceful place – fights are primarily one-on-one affairs, and it's best to avoid group ambushes. **2** It's a big world out there, and a dangerous one – trotting around this beautifully created world on foot will only get you so far. **3** The first-person viewpoint ensures you're always immersed in the action, seeing every interaction just as Henry would. **4** Get caught committing crimes and you can fight, flee, pay a fine, or get sent to the stockade. But you *will* be hunted. Be careful if you're planning wrongdoing.

session with Hans that introduces us to the weighty – albeit still clunky – combat system, sneakily wading through a pond to spy on some maidens bathing (it's teaching us stealth mechanics, okay?), and going through a process of gathering ingredients in order to make potions and remedies using an alchemy bench.

A KNIGHT'S TALE

All this does, however, make for a rather lengthy, linear, and cutscene-heavy affair, and even though Warhorse has designed KCD II to be accessible to newcomers who didn't play the first game, that doesn't stop the studio from inserting its fair share of flashback sequences. Nonetheless, the new cutscenes do well to show off a game that's designed to feel more cinematic than its predecessor, and you don't need any fantasy trappings to achieve that when you've got beautiful vistas and a rousing score.

That said, we don't really get a feel for the core non-linear medieval roleplaying until the second half of our demo, when we're finally in the silver-mining town of Kuttenberg (or Kutná Hora, as it is known today in Czech), one of two major maps in KCD II. While that speaks to a bigger game, as you might expect a sequel to be, density remains a focus as you can easily just follow townspeople around living their lives throughout the day or even walk past two men in the middle of an argument, where we have the option to interrupt to defuse or exacerbate the situation.

> **Warhorse has designed this sequel to be accessible to newcomers who didn't play the first game.**

Choosing violence, however, has consequences, notably tanking your reputation, so it's something to avoid if you want to complete quests with less trouble. That does mean we never get further than sparring with a sword or at most resorting to fisticuffs. The developer nonetheless promises more nuances in weapon combat this time, so, for instance, the directional inputs when wielding a mace would be simpler than those for a sword, while firearms using gunpowder may be powerful but also extremely slow to load.

While on a quest to steal and then display a sword to force the local swordfighting school into accepting a duel with our questgiver, we're grateful that KCD II's realism doesn't prevent us from having an option to skip time so that we can sneak into the school's building at the dead of night when we're less likely get caught. Of course, we still risk making a noise if we fail the lock-picking minigame, which requires squeezing L2 while guiding a ball icon around a turning mechanism with the right stick. That a rabbit is displayed on the HUD to indicate if your trespassing has been detected does at least show that whatever its claims for historical authenticity or realism, there's still some goofy charm there too.

Kingdom Come: Deliverance II is set to be released on 11 Feb 2025.

IN THE MOOD FOR...

Grappling hooks

These sensational ropebound hooks are the grapple of our eye

1 FLINTHOOK
This indie roguelike sees you bouncing around randomly generated levels like a resentful little pinball, spewing blaster bullets and slingshotting your way around incoming projectiles.

2 BATMAN: ARKHAM CITY
While Arkham Asylum's litany of bat-gadgets included a zippy little grappling tool, the ability came into its own in the sequel. Now you could fling yourself into the air and soar through the grimy skies. You could also come back down to earth with a bone-splintering thump, pausing only to wallop some crims before taking flight once more.

3 SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE
Over the course of the Dark Souls series, FromSoftware came to excel at making you feel like a frightened snail. Sekiro shakes things up with an emphasis on speed, and the ability to propel yourself from branch to rooftop (with by one of gaming's greatest grappling animations) is a defining feature of the game.

4 BIONIC COMMANDO
While this 2009 reboot may not have restored Major Nathan 'Rad' Spencer to household-name status, it did feature a grappling hook in the form of a bionic arm that lets you swing your way across a dystopian cityscape, and enables mid-air combat against robotic enemies.

5 TENCHU: STEALTH ASSASSINS
This stealth-'em-up snuck onto PlayStation a few months before Metal Gear Solid. But while Kojima's offering had cinematic glitz, Tenchu's levels offered a sense of openness and verticality, as you used your grappling hook to evade patrol patterns or skulk across unlit rooftops before closing in for the kill.

6 WORMS WORLD PARTY
It's hard to imagine why Team 17 chose earthworms as the stars of its turn-based mega-hit. But whatever the reason, Ninja Ropes have been enabling these wriggly warriors to swing, flip, and twirl through battlefields since the very beginning.

7 UNCHARTED 4: A THIEF'S END
Nathan Drake is dedicated to finding new ways to injure hard-working henchmen. Here, he harnesses the terrifying power of twisted yarn to swing around lush environments before dropping fist-first onto goons.

8 DEEP ROCK GALACTIC
When you're tunnelling deep into an alien-infested cave network, you'll be glad to have a Scout as part of your crew. As well as packing powerful sticky flares to shed light on all the shiny chitin and teeth out there, this class benefits from a satisfyingly zippy (and upgradeable) grappling hook.

9 JUST CAUSE 4
Sometimes games are like parents trying to teach you lessons about responsibility. They'll give you a powerful ability, but with cooldown timers and paltry stamina bars to ensure you're sensibly restrained. Just Cause is the fun uncle. "Take the grappling hook, parachute, *and* wingsuit. And yes, we can have an airport Toblerone for dinner."

1

2

3

HONOURABLE MENTIONS

Marvel's Spider-Man
Spidey's web-shooters occupy a special place in the history of game grappling hooks – hugely influential but obviously not grappling hooks.

Dying Light
Zombie hordes that once would have chewed you with impunity will now have to watch helplessly as you soar over their scabby heads.

Apex Legends
Pathfinder's grappling hook ability is another hit from the grapple-experts behind Titanfall 2. Shame this one's on a cooldown timer.

Did we miss your favourite hook? Got an In The Mood For idea? Show and tell at **twitter.com/PLAYgamingmag**

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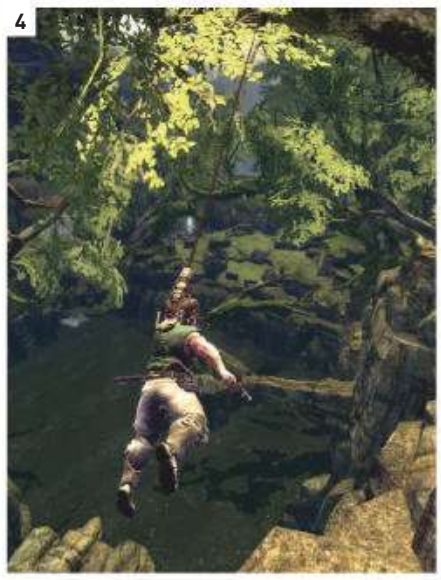

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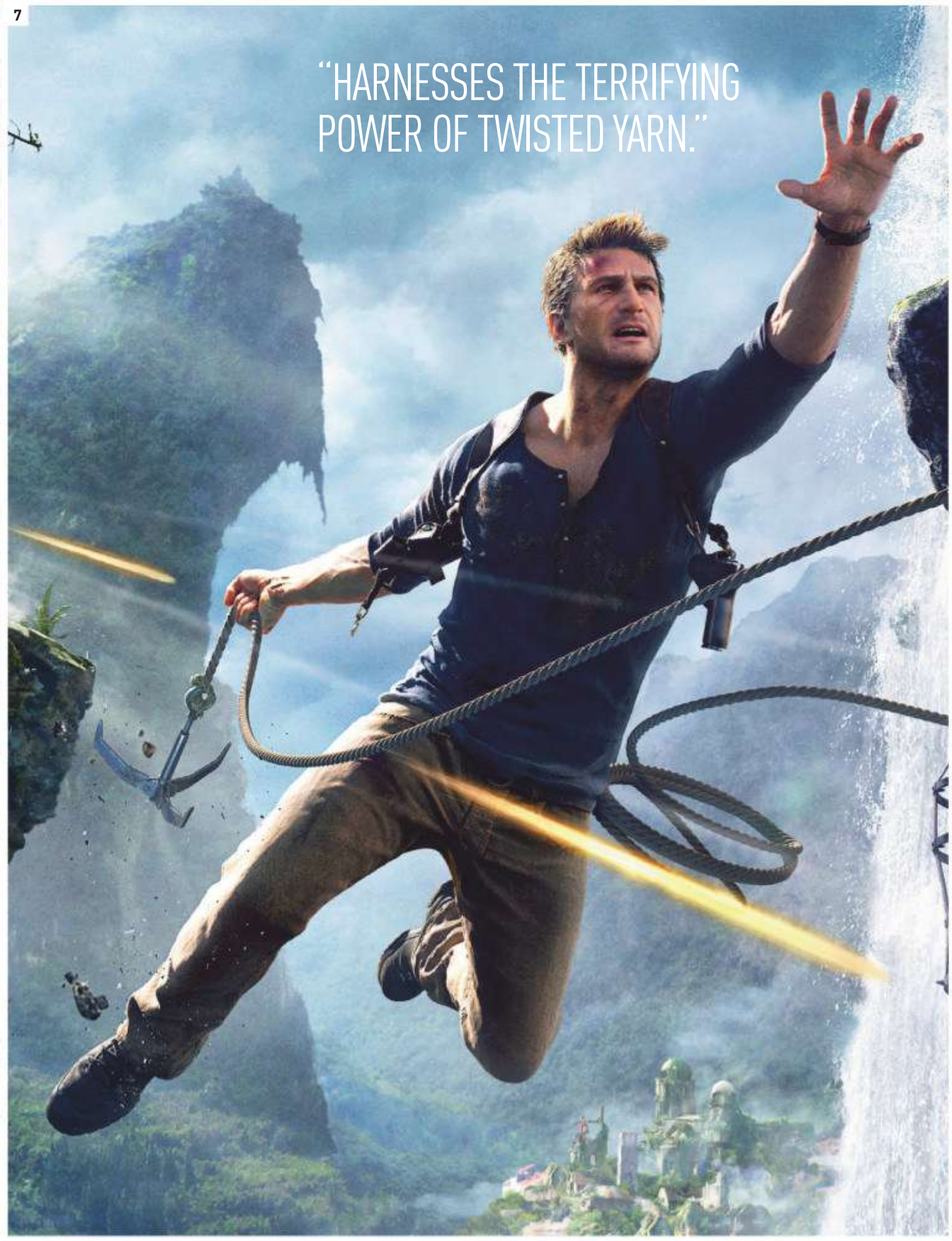

"HARNESSES THE TERRIFYING POWER OF TWISTED YARN."

8

9

> To open each £60 box and find only a disc is disappointing.

OPINION

WHY ARE THE INVITING MANUALS OF YESTERYEAR SUCH A THING OF THE PAST?

Physical media's great, and paying far more for less just seems unfair

WRITER BIO
Vic Pheasey's given her nan a break from studying game manuals in order to read new issues of PLAY, instead. A great swap, really.

Saturday mornings in the '90s typically involved me dragging my lovely nan into Electronics Boutique to surround myself with anything Lara-Croft-related. But before I was cheekily asking for a figurine week in, week out, little did I know that receiving some birthday money would change everything for little ol' me.

A shrinkwrapped pack of two games and £19.99 later, I quickly realised I wasn't fussed about managing a football team. I was, however, interested in learning more about a weapon-toting woman in turquoise.

Opening that cracked PlayStation Platinum box and turning the first page of the manual inside took me to another world. I'd soon find out that the grayscale image of the back of the adventurer would soon be brought to life, beginning her unforgettable quest in Peru. Reading the introduction to the character, I was hooked. Of course, I had to ask my nan what 'aristocracy' meant, but I didn't struggle to understand how Lara Croft's crash in the Himalayas changed her future forever, and how her sole survival inspired her future need for adventure.

Page after page regaled me with information on her arsenal, controls, and what Ms Croft could do in-game. What transpired, however, was fear, and something that a seven-year-old probably shouldn't have been playing. Yet that manual gave the only girl in a group of boys someone to become during lunchtime gambolling in primary school. And here I am, decades later, still loving Lara with those same pages to thank.

Exclusive editions are great, but paying hundreds of pounds for a bit more than just a disc is not.

QUITE THE SAD CASE

Present-day purchases don't seem to hold that same level of excitement, and that's not just down to age and life experience. With starting price points for new titles rarely less than £60, to open each box and find only a disc is disappointing.

With the demand for physical media back and growing, I can't help but question why we're no longer treated to a fun and informative manual to pass the time with, especially as waiting for those last few gigs to load can be painful. Sometimes you're lucky enough to receive a map, but as helpful as they can be, opening a booklet and immersing yourself into the narrative ahead of pushing START just feels far more inviting. So why are they a thing of the past?

Gaming has always been an expensive hobby; it was even in the '90s. But regardless of entry price point back then, you were guaranteed a manual at the very least. Having to spend hundreds of pounds to get any sort of merch can feel like daylight robbery. Just because we have adult money doesn't mean that we should have to pay hand-over-fist for the bare minimum.

I want to learn just how much health I'll gain from foraging red berries; I want to find exclusive images, in-depth backstories, and the occasional merch catalogue (looking at you, Lara C Merchandise). Sure, online is great, but flicking through a book and getting swept up in the lore of what's to come just feels far more inviting and exciting. So, with the prettiest of pleases and said foraged berry on top, fire up those printers, get them back in boxes, and allow us to be swept up in those pages once more.

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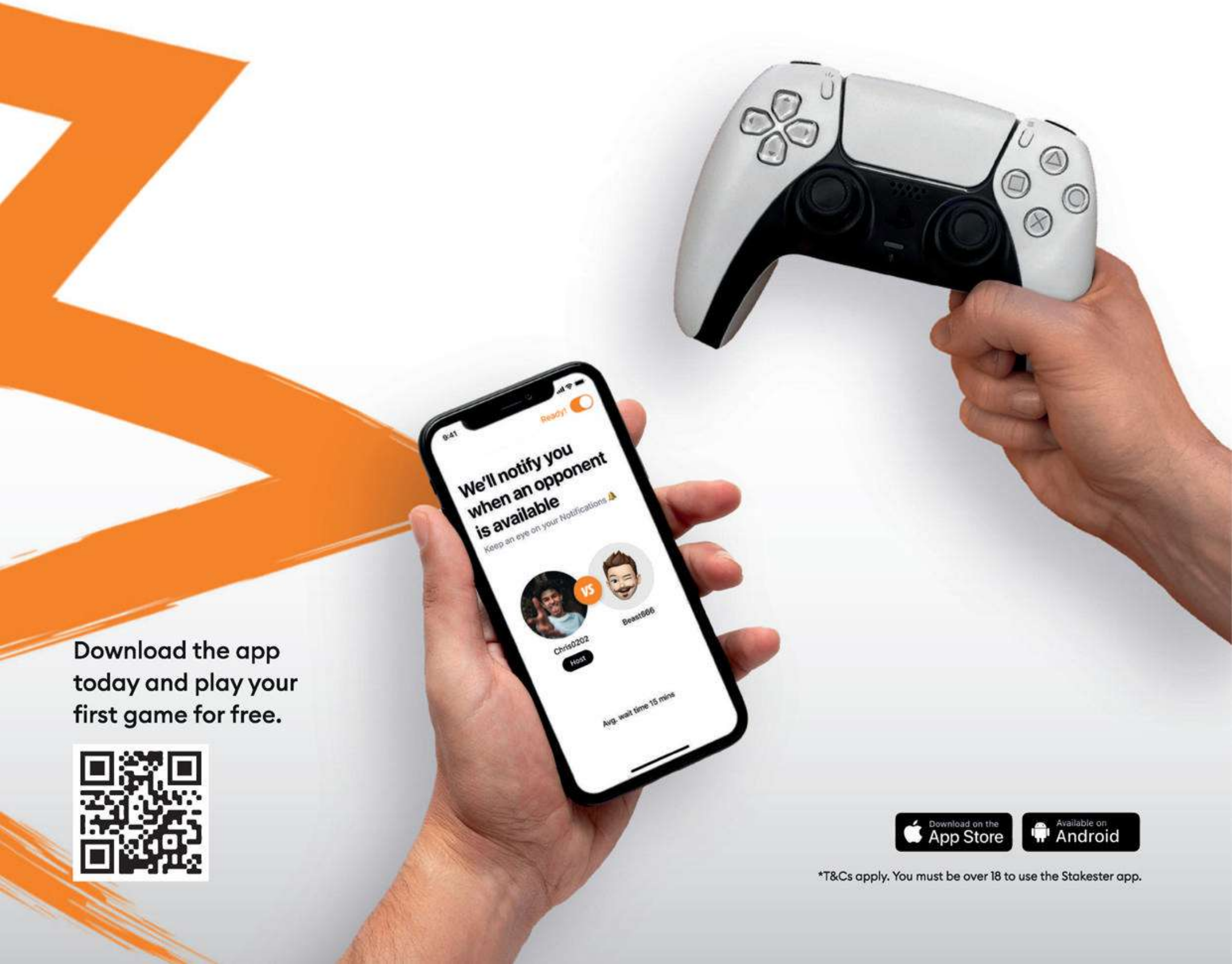

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OPINION

"THE NEXT LIKE A DRAGON SHOULD ALLOW A WOMAN TO TAKE CENTRE STAGE."

Women's stories have always been at the heart of Kamurocho anyhow

WRITER BIO
Alan Wen has long championed playable female characters, from picking Chun-Li in SFII to creating a female Warrior Of Light in FFXIV.

The Like A Dragon series may appear masculine to the extreme, especially when having the manliest of men (in the shape of former protagonist Kazuma Kiryu) and the patriarchal nature of the yakuza criminal organisations at the heart of its stories [more on that back in PLAY #43!]. However, women have always had a role in the series.

Even RGG Studio head Masayoshi Yokoyama has said that the foundation of the series isn't so much the yakuza but "the red light district, the people who live there and their stories". In other words, women should be at the heart of those stories. It's just that in the past, their roles have often been reduced to either that of the damsel who needs rescuing or that of an object for the (presumed male) player to ogle at.

Some kudos should be given to the creators of more recent entries, which have sought to address this imbalance. For instance, Yakuza: Like A Dragon's Saeko may work as a hostess but she's also fiercely capable and suffers no fools, making her a strong member of Ichiban's party. Not that female characters have to be tough to stand out. Yakuza 5 was the first time the series had a playable female character – Haruka, as she goes through a journey to become a J-pop idol. Compared to the titillation of previous games, there was something unique about being able to empathise with the challenges she faces, especially as a young woman enduring sexist creeps.

Chitose's a playable party member in Infinite Wealth, not relegated to a supporting role.

LIKE A LAD(Y)

The next logical step, then, is for RGG Studio to go all the way and let a woman take centre stage in its next Like A Dragon game. I don't mean we should be retiring Ichiban; he's terrific as he is. However, the possibility for a female-fronted game in the LAD universe exists, given spinoffs like Judgment or even smaller standalone titles like Like A Dragon Gaiden. Imagine a female investigator who has to go undercover as a cabaret hostess, inadvertently giving the perfect excuse to recycle the excellent cabaret club management minigame from Yakuza 0 and Kiwami 2. Judgment's Saori had to undertake a similar assignment – I'd love to see this expanded upon.

Although the studio has also taken something of a gendered approach to its playable female characters (think of the split in job classes in the recent turn-based RPG instalments, or how Haruka's version of 'street battles' were rhythm games) this can be a good thing. Where a lot of games simply add a female protagonist who plays the same as her male counterpart, it's an opportunity to take a different approach. After all, spinoffs can better get away with experimenting with game mechanics.

Gaiden was interesting in how Akame's actor, First Summer Uika, wanted to portray her differently to past female characters, though the next brave step would be instead of having her as an annoying quest-giver, to allow us to play as her defending Sotenbori's homeless in the same way that Seonhee graduated from NPC to party member in LAD: Infinite Wealth. Instead of being a victim caught in the underbelly of the sex trade or a struggling businesswoman waiting for Ichiban to come to the rescue, it's time these sisters were doing it for themselves.

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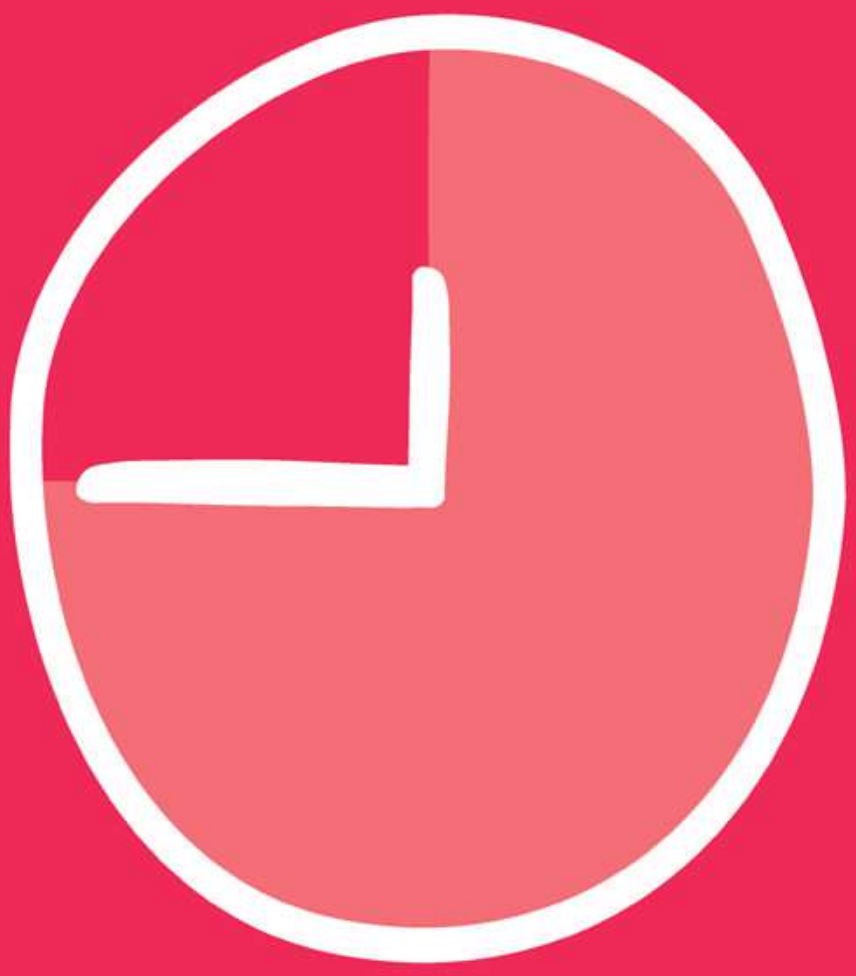

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Previews

"MORE THAN PERSONA IN POINTY EARS."

048 Metaphor: ReFantazio

030 Life Is Strange: Double Exposure

Dialling up our excitement to Max

HIGHLIGHTS

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"THE COMBAT IN MONSTER HUNTER WILDS STILL FEELS FRESH."

You're going to need the biggest sword you can grab to knock out Capcom's roster of big beasts, like our pal here, the Chatacabra.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** CAPCOM
DEV CAPCOM / **PLAYERS** 1-4

Monster Hunter Wilds

Capcom's ambitious followup is wild at heart

From the moment Capcom confirmed that Monster Hunter Wilds would be playable at Gamescom 2024, it was almost inevitable that it would be our favourite game of the show. If the time we spent with it is anything to go by, the long-awaited followup to Monster Hunter World is shaping up to be the series' new apex predator.

While the series has been around for years, it was 2018's Monster Hunter World that propelled it from being for us sickos willing to hold a PSP in the wrist-destroying claw grip to a series for everyone – World was the most successful game Capcom had ever made. Since then we've had the fantastic Monster Hunter Rise from the portable team (which became the company's second most successful game), but we've been awaiting a true followup to the series' breakout title. Monster Hunter Wilds was revealed at The Game Awards last year, and every glimpse since has made us desperate to get our hands on a Great Sword and bash some Behemoths.

FACTRICK

1. OPEN UP

Base camps are now found within the biomes you hunt in, meaning you can walk straight into action.

2. OLD FRIEND

Capcom hasn't really shown returning monsters, but Rathalos made a cameo in the first trailer.

3. SEIKRET SAUCE

Players have access to the bird mount Seikret, who will automatically head towards your destination.

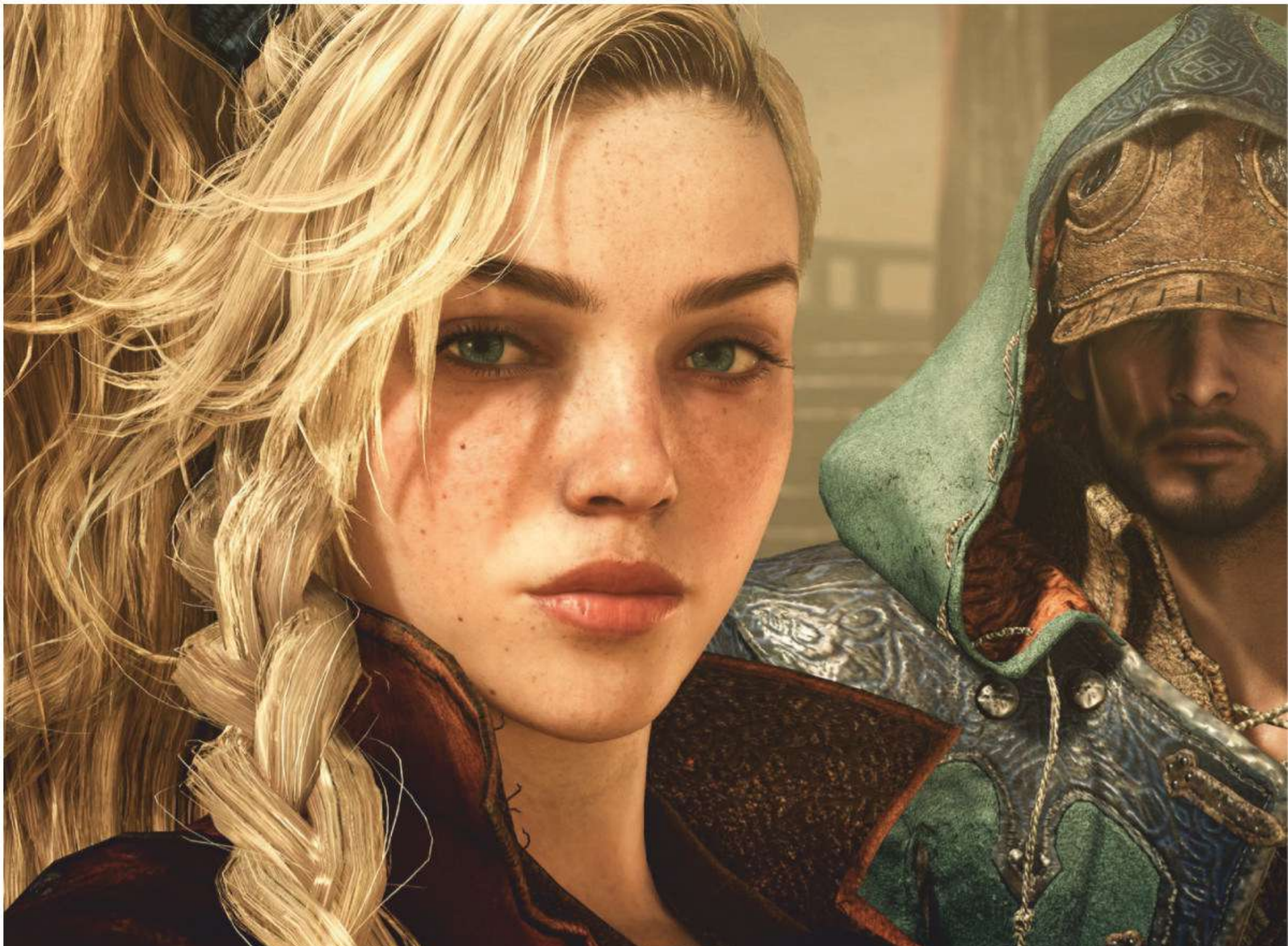
WILD AS THE WIND

Our first portion of the demo takes us through what seems to be the beginning of the game. Your Hunter is in charge of an expedition to the Forbidden Lands and is investigating some monster sightings in the area – pretty standard Monster Hunter stuff. However, it does seem as though the story will have a bit more of a focus this time around, as we're treated to a lengthy flashback cutscene before getting into the action. But the main event is, of course, the eponymous monster hunting.

Our party of characters is besieged by a Chatacabra – a hulking beast that can best be described as a frog crossed with a silverback gorilla – and we're thrust right into our first battle. Although Wilds isn't introducing any additional weapon types, the combat still feels fresh thanks to some fantastic changes. We use the Charge Blade, Hammer, and Great Sword during our time with the game, and each has some new tricks, such as the Hammer's 'Mighty Charge', which has us swinging a massive hammer like Thor himself before smashing the monster.

What's more, every weapon now has access to a 'Focus mode' that allows you to target your strikes more accurately. It's a minor buff, but in conjunction with the new wound system, it becomes a big deal. During battle, monsters will accrue wounds which you can then target for extra damage, or you can use the devastating Focus mode attacks to

TRACK RECORD Monster Hunter Wilds is being developed by the series' main team, directed by Monster Hunter World director Yuya Tokuda, who has worked on the games since 2006's Monster Hunter Freedom.



close these wounds in exchange for dealing huge damage and knocking your enemy back.

The second quest we play is the one we saw in the hands-off presentation at Summer Games Fest. In it, we are after an Alpha Doshaguma – which allows us to get to grips with two of the other mechanics new to Wilds. The alpha monster is surrounded by a herd of lesser Doshaguma, and while we only need to take down the big lad, separating it from the herd is our top priority, adding an extra layer of strategy to the combat. Meanwhile, the game's weather rages on around us. There are often sandstorms on the Windward Plains, and these can turn into lightning storms, leading to the arrival of the area's apex monster, Rey Dau, who can destroy you and your target with ease.

IF LOOKS COULD KILL

Monster Hunter Wilds is the latest game to be made using Capcom's RE Engine, which is a long-winded way of saying it's just as gorgeous as the likes of Resident Evil 4 and Devil May Cry 5. The environments are beautifully rendered (especially during the storm), as are the character models, but of course the real stars are the monsters. Even in their basic forms, each one is intricately designed (the Chatacabra has a bumhole; it's *that* thorough), and as the fight continues, you'll notice wear and tear on the monsters as you attack specific areas.

The one negative thing we notice during our demo is that the game has some framerate issues on PS5, but they're nowhere near as bad as in the other RE Engine open world game, Dragon's Dogma 2, at any time. Plus, the game doesn't have a release date yet, so there's always time for that to change.

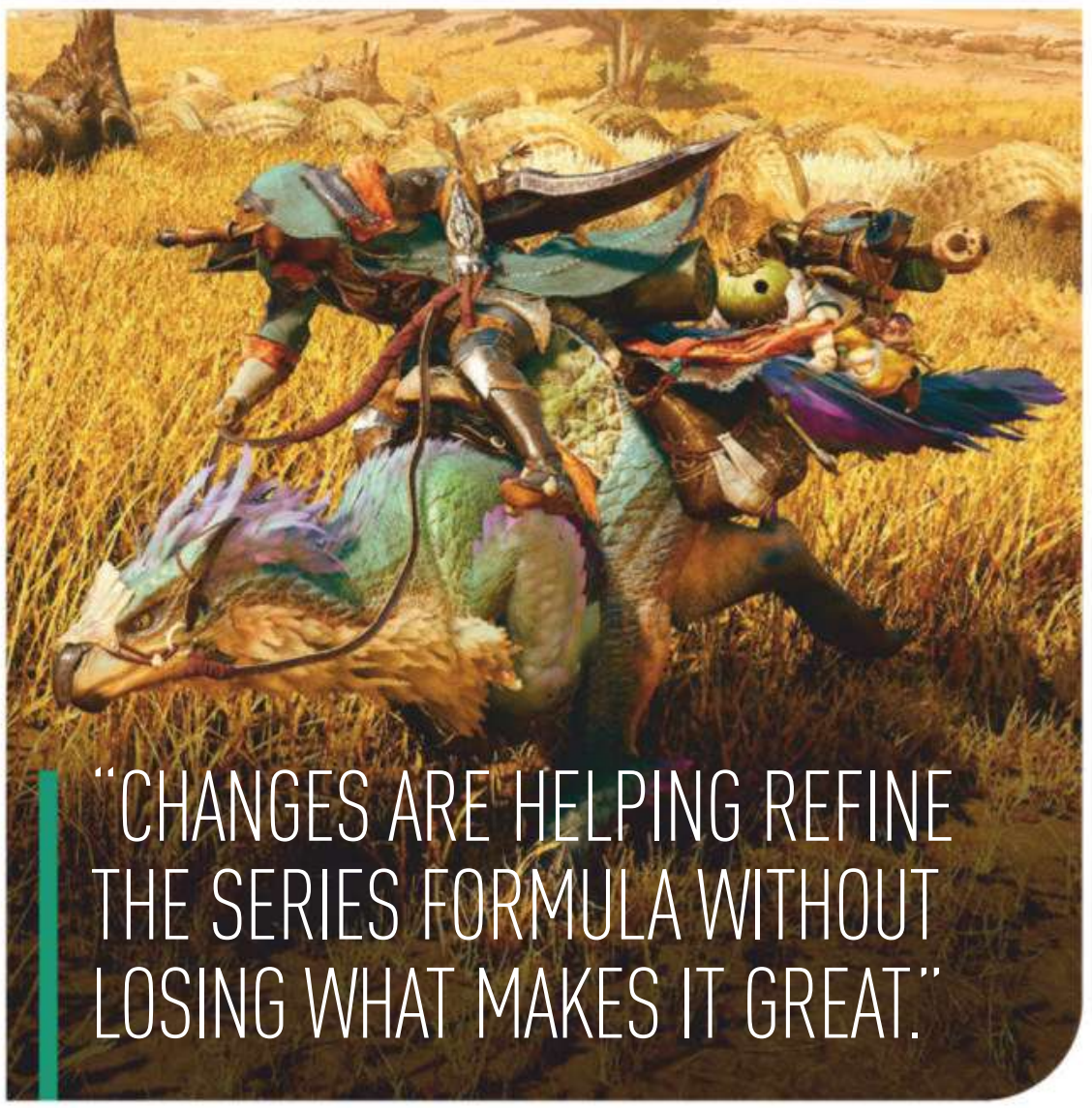
Capcom is determined to streamline the game. You walk from your base straight into the wilds. Players can now equip both the masculine and feminine variations of the armour sets regardless of their character's gender. Plus, the updated wheel menu will automatically select which healing item is best suited to your character based on your current situation. Changes like these are helping refine the series' formula without losing what makes it so great in the first place.

IMPRESSIONS

Monster Hunter Wilds looks like being one of the most impressive games in the long-running series. If the full release lives up to this demo, it'll be a contender for the best game of 2025.

1 The RE Engine's incredible character models continue to impress us – we're hoping we'll be able to craft the best-looking sets of gear ever. 2 Sometimes you just need to let the monsters have a wee scrap between themselves. 3 We got our first look at the terrifying Lala Barina in a new Gamescom trailer. We can't wait to tackle this one for ourselves. 4 Taking a party on a hunt is just as exciting as ever. We love a challenge.

Capcom's dedication to amazing looking in-game grub continues in Monster Hunter Wilds – "So tasty!!!"



"CHANGES ARE HELPING REFINE THE SERIES FORMULA WITHOUT LOSING WHAT MAKES IT GREAT."

Monster Hunter Generations

The history of Monster Hunter on PlayStation

01

Monster Hunter debuted on PS2 in 2004. MH 2's PS2 release skipped the West, but eventually arrived worldwide with PSP's Freedom series in 2006.

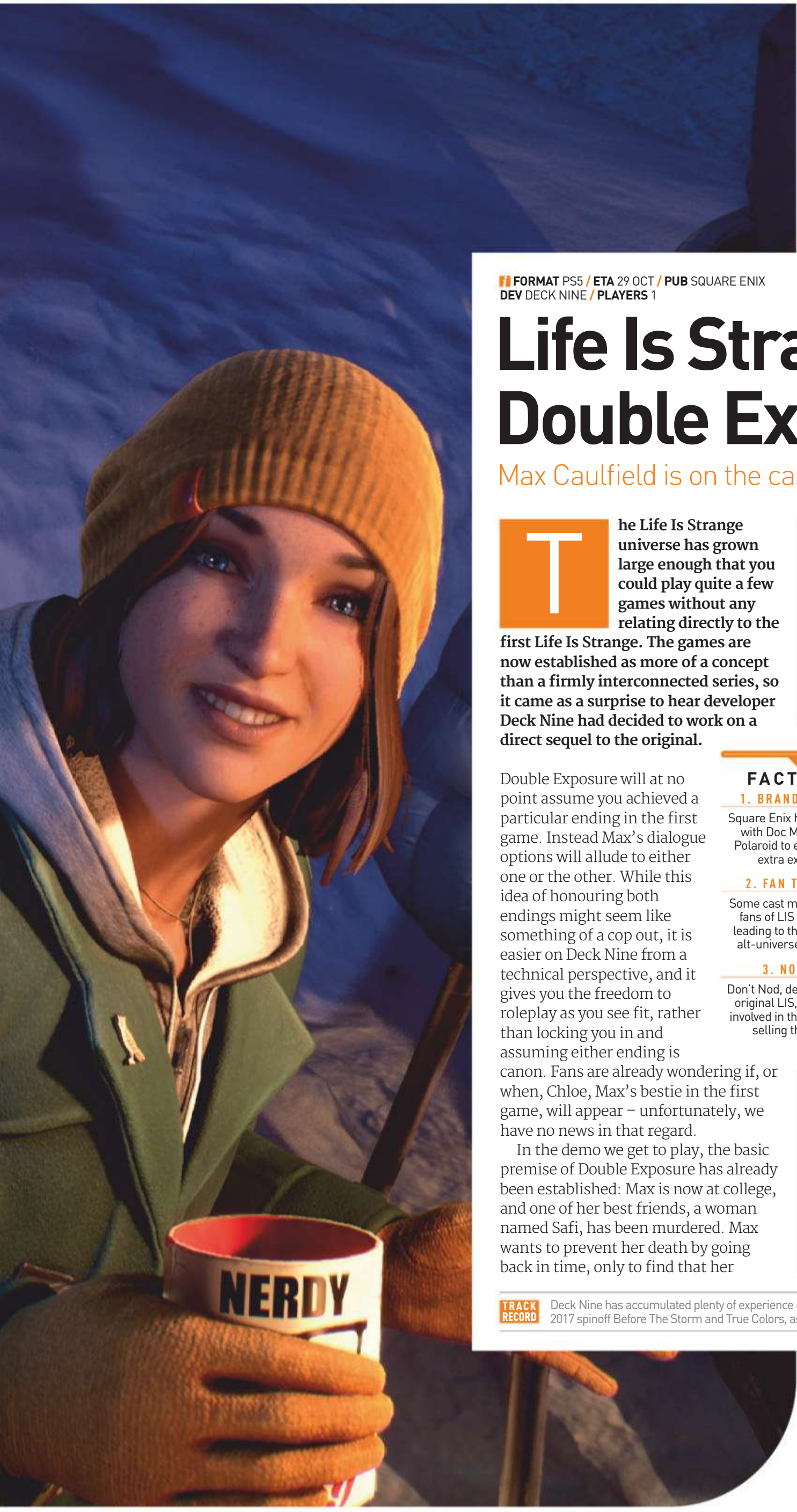
02

Capcom went with Nintendo platforms for MH 3. But 2010's Japan-exclusive Monster Hunter Portable 3rd is the second best selling PSP game despite that.

03

After MH 4 the series skipped PlayStation, but Monster Hunter World launched on PS4 in 2018 and became Capcom's best-selling game of all time.

Max has started at a prestigious school, stopped using her powers, and made new friends in Safi and Moses, but the calm won't last long.



FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 29 OCT / **PUB** SQUARE ENIX
DEV DECK NINE / **PLAYERS** 1

Life Is Strange: Double Exposure

Max Caulfield is on the case again

The Life Is Strange universe has grown large enough that you could play quite a few games without any relating directly to the first Life Is Strange. The games are now established as more of a concept than a firmly interconnected series, so it came as a surprise to hear developer Deck Nine had decided to work on a direct sequel to the original.

Double Exposure will at no point assume you achieved a particular ending in the first game. Instead Max's dialogue options will allude to either one or the other. While this idea of honouring both endings might seem like something of a cop out, it is easier on Deck Nine from a technical perspective, and it gives you the freedom to roleplay as you see fit, rather than locking you in and assuming either ending is canon. Fans are already wondering if, or when, Chloe, Max's bestie in the first game, will appear – unfortunately, we have no news in that regard.

In the demo we get to play, the basic premise of Double Exposure has already been established: Max is now at college, and one of her best friends, a woman named Safi, has been murdered. Max wants to prevent her death by going back in time, only to find that her powers have changed. Instead of going back in time, she now opens different timelines by finding glowing nodes in the environment and touching them. Moses Murphy, another of Safi's friends, who works in a physics lab with her, is the number-one suspect in the murder case, having taken and hidden Safi's camera (for sentimental reasons only, of course). Now it's up to us to find and take the camera before the detective assigned to Safi's case does.

FACTRICK

1. BRANDS? DEAL!

Square Enix has partnered with Doc Martens and Polaroid to ensure some extra exposure.

2. FAN THEORIES

Some cast models remind fans of LIS characters, leading to theories about alt-universe alter egos.

3. NO NODS

Don't Nod, developer of the original LIS, is no longer involved in the series after selling the rights.

HIDE AND SEEK

Even though Max now travels through dimensions instead of time, it doesn't feel very different in practise as we play. We find a glowing node in a hallway and just like that, we slip through to a sunny afternoon when Moses is working in his lab and Safi is still alive. Asking Moses where he would hide important contraband doesn't lead to the camera, but that would have been too easy, wouldn't it? It does, however, lead to a videogame classic: the note to self.

Moses left himself a note of where he hid the camera, but it's cryptic at best, telling us it should be somewhere "under the star". There are plenty of red herrings in the office, from glowing star stickers to posters of star constellations, so we end up going through everything we can find. It's the perfect opportunity for Double Exposure to showcase one

TRACK RECORD Deck Nine has accumulated plenty of experience of making Life Is Strange games by now, having created the 2017 spinoff Before The Storm and True Colors, as well as the remasters of the original.

1

of the series' biggest strengths – even though we are not playing the game right from the beginning and are thus almost certainly missing some context, the lab really comes alive when Max looks at the many different knickknacks strewn around the room. A cardigan here, a photo there, Moses talking about his prank wars with a neighbouring lab; it really doesn't take much for it to feel like we have a better understanding of people we haven't even met by the time we finish exploring.

Following a short puzzle that involves realigning the projection of a star chart on the lab walls, we finally find the camera. It's not rocket science, but the multiple redirects we face to get the camera are fun, and you don't really expect heavy puzzling from Life Is Strange. In order to find the camera, we seamlessly slip in and out of timelines, which still looks cool even after we've done it several times, and by the end we've come to know Moses, a character new to the series, a bit better than before.

LIFE GETS STRANGER

There might also be more to Max's powers than shifting into different dimensions. In desperate need of a way to distract Detective Alderman so he doesn't spot her, Max actually manages to transplant a fully built telescope from the dimension she came from into her own, effectively switching a piece of machinery from the other dimension for a version of it in her present, where it's already been taken apart and put into boxes. This power to transfer objects will undoubtedly come in handy, but it might also cause her significant strain – making something appear out of thin air is a significant undertaking, after all. And the first game made it clear that pushing Max's power too far could have consequences…

But for now, we've managed to save the day! Before we leave, Detective Alderman asks us to co-operate with him and give him any information we come across. This is framed as one of the weighty decisions that will influence the course of the story. It seems like a small choice, but if we've learned one thing about Life Is Strange, it's that nothing is ever as simple as it seems.

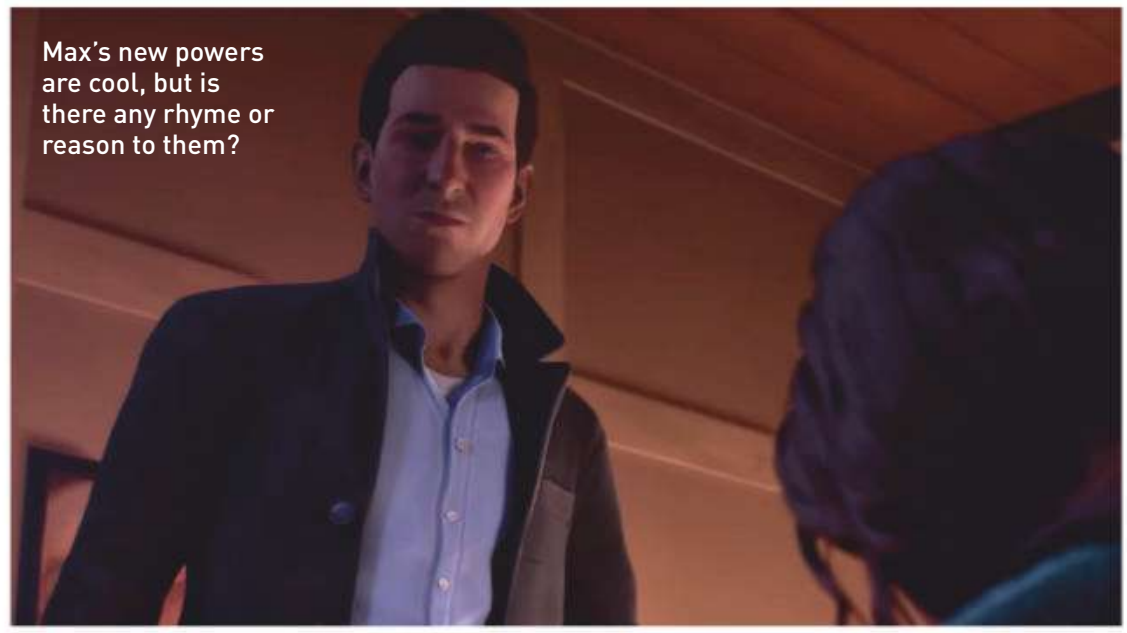
IMPRESSIONS

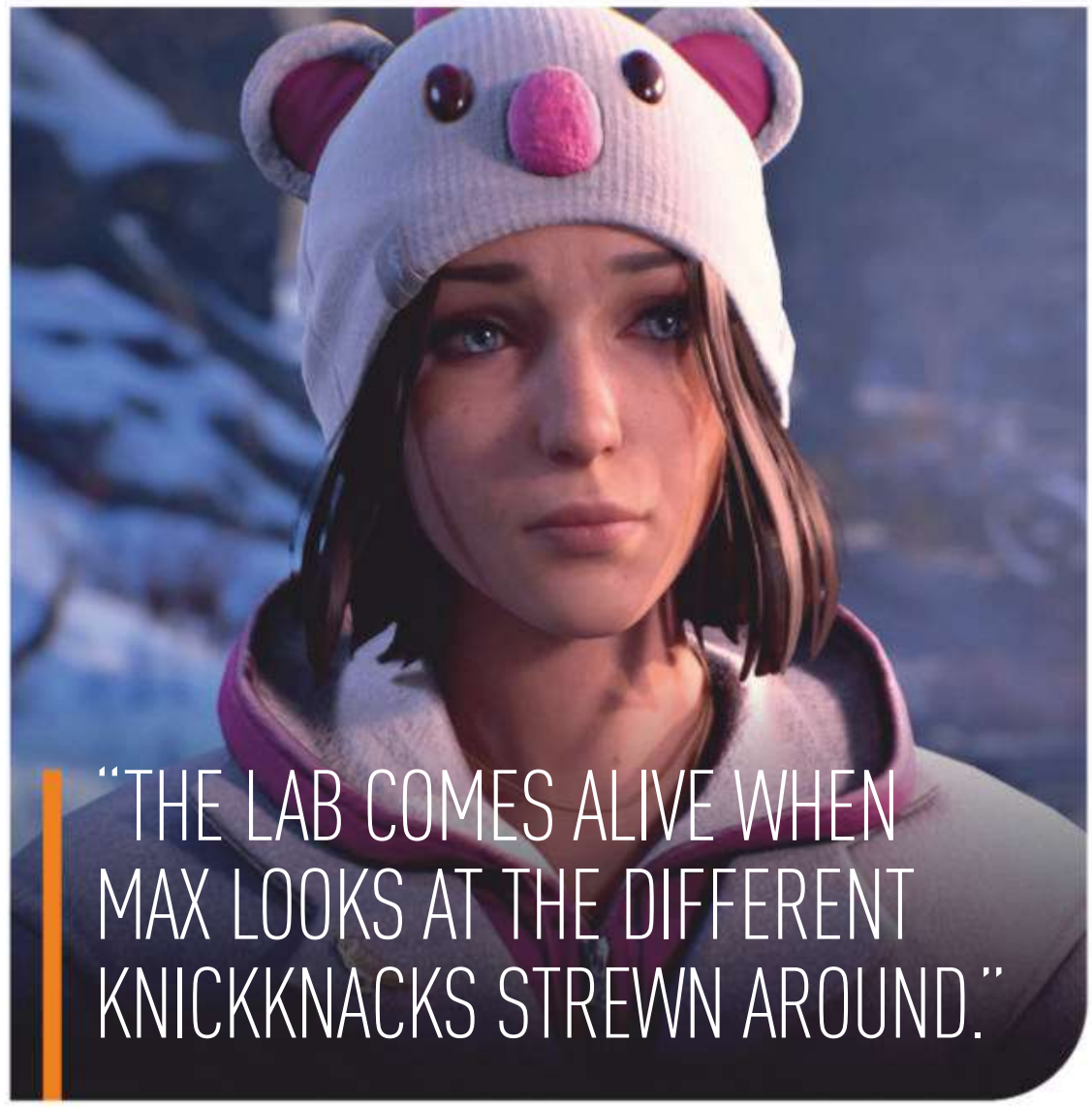
There's a lot to love about Double Exposure already, as it sticks to the immediately familiar mix of cosy and dramatic. Our only worry is how it will fit with the events of the original.

2

3

1 As the main suspect in the murder, Moses is clearly in trouble, and we're coming to the supernatural rescue. Hang in there, pal! 2 Because Max has new powers, newcomers to the series won't be disadvantaged when they play. 3 Asking Moses what he did with the camera can't hurt, but we won't find it that easily. Some people just don't want to be helped... 4 If you send out a pulse, you can see items from another dimension.


Max's new powers are cool, but is there any rhyme or reason to them?



"THE LAB COMES ALIVE WHEN MAX LOOKS AT THE DIFFERENT KNICKKNACKS STREWN AROUND."

Rewind the clock

Some cameos we've spotted in Double Exposure

01

Hawt damn, it's hawt dawg man, returned as the most annoying Christmas ornament known to mankind. Even so, he has a vital role to play...

02

While the appearance of a double moon in LIS was never explained, it hinted at the existence of parallel universes all the way back in the first game.

03

There's no word on whether we will actually see Chloe, given the ending of LIS, but Max is carrying a memento of her all the same.

Gorgeously spooky art direction and smart framing enhances the terror of these tykes' predicament.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** THQ NORDIC / **DEV** TARSIER STUDIOS / **PLAYERS** 1-2

Reanimal

Alive and kicking

You know the saying, 'Curiosity killed the cat,' though what is all too often forgotten is the bookend, 'Satisfaction brought it back.' From the original developer of Little Nightmares (the third game is currently in development at cinematic horror expert Supermassive Games) comes this fresh horror.

Much like in Little Nightmares II, you follow two masked protagonists – this time a brother and sister – through an all-new, skin-prickling tale of terror. The siblings carefully pick their way through a once familiar, now gut-churning landscape in search of their imperilled friends.

It's playable in both local and online co-op, players sharing the camera's focus rather than seeking solace in split-screen. Also new for a Tarsier frightfest is the deployment of spoken dialogue. It remains to be seen just how chatty these plucky orphans will turn out to be, but initial glimpses suggest Tarsier will save their words for only the most skin-crawling of utterances. Our first look at the game opens with the words "Nothing lasts forever," and they're right, you know – sometimes it even comes back *worse*.

ISLE OF FRIGHT

Something rotten has gone to ground on the island your twin protagonists once called home, seeding scares halfway between Playdead's Inside and something altogether a bit more Pet Sematary. As in Tarsier's earlier work, your best bet for survival is sneaking past the horrors unnoticed. Even so, that's a more complicated prospect this time around as the influence of whatever evil has taken root is far-reaching to say the least…

> "HALFWAY BETWEEN INSIDE AND PET SEMATARY."

Emissaries of this malicious presence take a variety of forms, from the tried-and-true Tarsier enemy design of 'spindly adults' and 'far-from-auspicious-authoritarians' to the exciting new inclusion of '*blorp!*ed-up farm animals.' A particularly arresting set-piece sees a many-limbed lamb towering over the orphans – and leaves us seriously considering the virtues of veganism.

IMPRESSIONS

We're excited to see Tarsier claw its creepy way back onto our consoles. Long live the new nightmare!

These young'uns used to call the island home, but now nothing feels either cosy or familiar.

ON THE HORIZON

The next six months, mapped out

02 months

SLITTERHEAD

Only the bodiless Hyoki can do anything to stop Slitterhead, body-hopping all over the shop.

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 8 NOV
PUB BOKEH GAME STUDIO

04 months

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – BLOODLINES 2

Now delayed until the first half of next year.

FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA EARLY 2025
PUB PARADOX INTERACTIVE

06 months

LOST RECORDS: BLOOM & RAGE – TAPE 2

The conclusion of Don't Nod's throwback fable. Two words: hit record!

FORMAT PS5, PS4
ETA 18 MAR / **PUB** DON'T NOD

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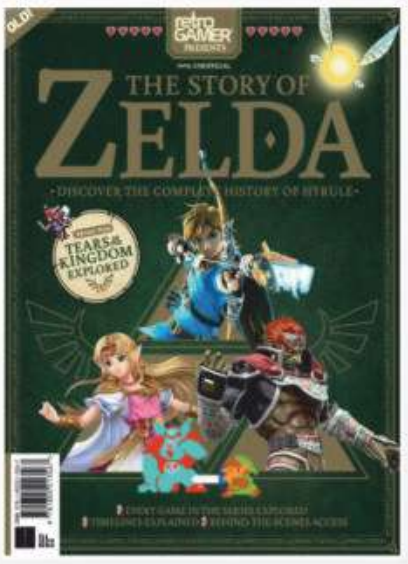

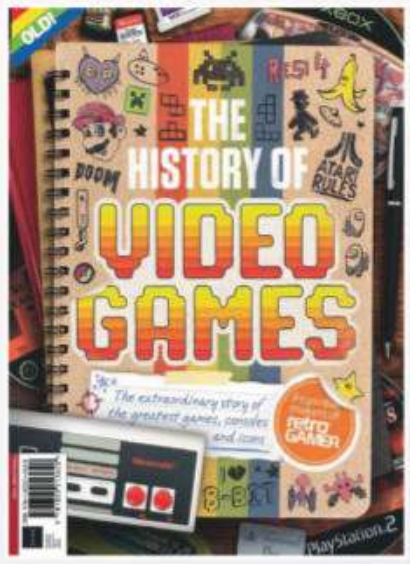

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PREVIEW

"THE SHIP IS HUMANITY'S LAST CHANCE TO SURVIVE AMONG THE STARS."

If we're humanity's last chance... enjoy the universe, bugs.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 20 SEP / **PUB** SUPERMASSIVE GAMES
DEV SUPERMASSIVE GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1-5

Directive 8020

Supermassive's most ambitious game yet

The next game in the Dark Pictures Anthology (though that branding has been minimised here), Directive 8020, feels like what Supermassive Games has been building towards for the last half a decade. With a more open design and new control system, this feels less like QTE cinema and more akin to survival horror such as Dead Space and The Callisto Protocol.

"We planned through the course of the Season One games [that there would be] little steps towards this [but] this is a big leap forward," acknowledges creative director Will Boyle as he introduces us to the game. While previous Dark Pictures games have been built off the bones of branching narrative adventures, with Directive 8020 Supermassive wants to inject much more activity into the equation.

FACTRICK

1. GOTTA START

Lashana Lynch is known for films like Captain Marvel and The Woman King but hasn't worked in horror before.

2. GOTTA START

The game's creative director Will Doyle's previous credits include writing Kinect: Disneyland Adventures.

3. BAD ENDING

At Gamescom the devs asked the audience if they wanted Lynch's character to survive the demo... We all voted no.

HORROR LENS

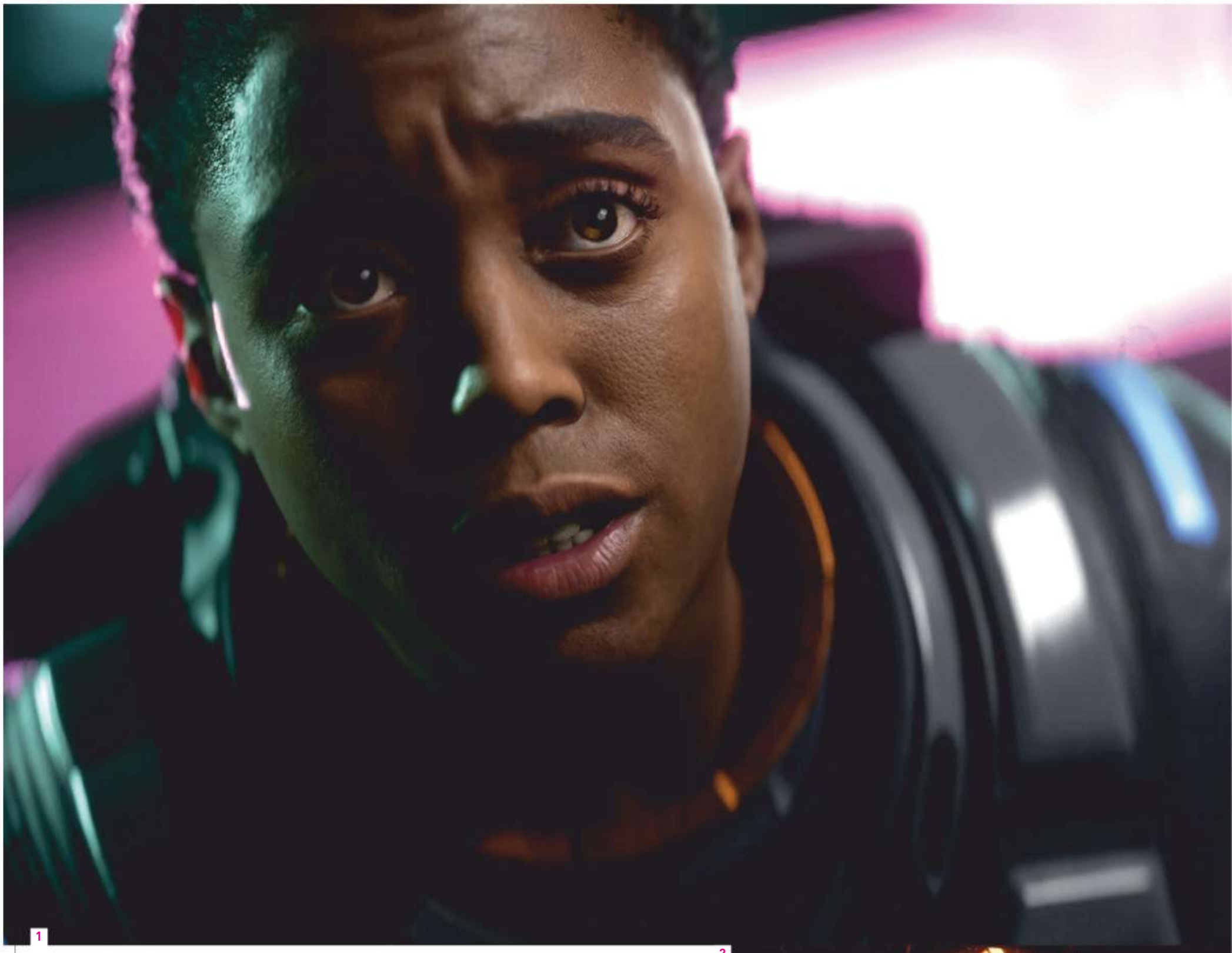
This can even be seen even in the camera position. While predecessors like Little Hope, House Of Ashes, and Man Of Medan favoured cinematic camera angles, 8020's emphasis on an over-the-shoulder camera is more in line with modern survival horror. The same goes for the mechanics, our demo featuring a stealth section in which staying out of sight of shapeshifting monsters is vital. Trapped alongside them on the Cassiopeia, you're fighting not just to survive for yourself, but as the ship is humanity's last chance to survive among the stars, for our species' survival.

There are seven main crew members, between them having access to devices such as a utility strap to remotely control electronics, a scanner which works like Batman's detective vision (er, if it were super-crappy and could only send out a ping once every second and a half), a messenger device to check in with your fellow survivors, and an electric wedge tool that looks like a cross between a baton and a taser. The idea is that these tools will give you the impetus to further explore and approach your objectives in different ways, but Supermassive is keen to make it clear that there's still "no comfort in exploration", and sometimes the best thing to do is to just get the hell out of Dodge rather than look for a reward off the beaten track.

During our demo, we receive a side-objective to check in on a crewmate called Mitchell, who's been locked in an infirmary after becoming erratic in his behaviour. However, our reward for tracking him down isn't some upgrade materials, but instead a confrontation with another monstrous organism halfway through the process of becoming a Mimic Mitchell. This encounter doesn't end well, and we're treated to a rather gory death sequence.

In fact, all this extra control in Directive 8020 looks like it will make the game much more difficult, or at least

TRACK RECORD While the branding has been minimised, this is the fifth Dark Pictures game. Supermassive has also made standalone horror titles like Until Dawn, The Quarry, and Dead By Daylight spinoff The Casting Of Frank Stone.



1

» increase the margin of error drastically in life-or-death situations . You're no longer just trying to hit the QTE commands, you've got full control of the character – and if you mess up, death is permanent. We ask the devs about this and they have two answers: first, it's confirmed that the team is currently working on a 'no death' accessibility option that will ensure you (and your friends if you're playing in multiplayer) will get to see an ending where all the characters survive; and, second, when we ask if there would be respawning or a survival mechanic brought into the series, we're told that the team are looking at ways to mitigate everyone dying/game overs.

DARK DELIGHTS

One of the best things about The Dark Pictures series is that it shows how well Supermassive understands the horror genre. From casting characters to chew scenes to nailing the varying levels of camp and dread needed for each subgenre the different games play around with, the team just seem to love horror. That said, the challenge now is to match the calibre of horror media that this game will inevitably be compared to. While House Of Ashes definitely played with a more serious setting (the Iraq war), most of these games have leaned into being referential to quite campy subgenres. With Directive 8020, the team will find their work being compared to cinematic masterpieces like Alien and The Thing. Dan McDonald, Directive 8020's executive producer, doesn't seem to be fazed, though, saying, "It's great to be compared to those kinds of things, or that we can compare ourselves to that", highlighting that the dev team love the freedom of being able to hop between genres and tones and styles. He says, "We want [all of our fans] scared out of their minds but we want them to laugh and cry."

The chance to welcome players to new types of horror (whether that's schlocky or dead serious) is something the team seem to take great joy in. Regardless of whether Directive 8020 manages to be a good game while introducing a new audience to futuristic horror, it's hard not to respect it as a goal.

IMPRESSIONS

Directive 8020 looks like a bold new direction for The Dark Pictures, but the devs are saying all the right things and certainly have a firm grasp on what kind of horror game they want to make.

2

3

1 Now would be a good time to run, Lashana... (Seriously, how beautifully are the faces rendered? And how awful is that going to make the horrors?) 2 We doubt anything bad happened here or anything. 3 Equally, this look like a perfectly safe space where nothing bad has happened. Well, there's less twisted metal than in the last location, at any rate. 4 Please do not touch the goo, no matter how pretty the purply-pink colour!

4

Oh, we don't think your body is meant to look like that.

"WE WANT [OUR FANS] SCARED OUT OF THEIR MINDS BUT WE WANT THEM TO LAUGH AND CRY."

Picture house

Our favourite prior games in the Dark Pictures Anthology

01

The Man Of Medan asked the question: what if Shenmue was set on a boat and spooky as heck? Remote co-op means different jumps for players.

02

Rumoured to be based on a Silent Hill pitch, Little Hope is similarly foggy and similarly psychological, centring on a sordid historical witch trial.

03

The Devil In Me features a documentary film crew we love to hate as they run around a hotel that is also a serial killer's shifting deathtrap murder maze.

1

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** WHITE OWLS / **DEV** WHITE OWLS / **PLAYERS** 1

Hotel Barcelona

Is a criminal record a requirement to stay here?

The collaboration of Swery65, known for his horror work like Deadly Premonition, with the wild mind behind No More Heroes and Killer7, Suda51, feels like one made in heaven – where they walk, cult classics follow. While they're long-time friends, Hotel Barcelona marks the first time the pair have created something together.

So, exactly what sort of game do you get when you bring these two together in the same room? Well, you get not just one room, but a whole hotel, and a potentially endless one at that.

At a strange hotel on the outskirts of Pittsburgh, serial killers have gathered. And you're one of them – even though you're a policewoman, you have the spirit of a serial killer living inside you. Don't assume the combination of developers means either one has mellowed; this is as fully absurd and slasher-horror-like as a game can be. Playing through each level in order to exterminate the hotel's clientele of killers, each at least partially inspired by the golden age of 1980s horror, don't expect a clean victory: you will die, and each death makes you stronger and gives you a fighting chance of slicing these killers down to size.

FACTRICK

1. SHINING LIGHT

While not all the horror film inspirations have been revealed, Swery65 cited The Shining as a major one.

2. MISSING LINK

Swery65's The Missing features a core mechanic where death and injury are used to aid your progression.

3. MORE HEROES

This game was conceived on stage during a No More Heroes event in 2019. Work on it started a year later.

KILL AGAIN

Gunning for the head of a boss-level serial killer means working your way through the hotel's many hallways, making for dungeons not dissimilar to those in roguelikes such as Hades, as you'll have a choice of the sequence in which you take on levels before you face off against the head honcho. Each choice offers different stat-boosting rewards, meaning you'll need to work towards creating optimum builds before the end. Death means, of course, trying again – but this is where Hotel Barcelona stands out. Cop it, and a Slasher Phantom based on your last attempt is created, a sort of ghost that robotically follows the path of previous failures and repeats the actions you took, meaning you can play buddy-cop with a past version of yourself that will slice enemies just as you did, effectively watching your back and freeing you to stop other attackers.

These phantoms can be genuine lifesavers, doing everything from helping you hold down ground to simply dealing more total damage in combination with your new strikes. That's as true when it comes to tackling boss serial killers as their goons. These multi-phase monstrosities take a lot of work to put down, and feel like some of the hardest fights the two devs have ever come up with (and some of the ones in No More Heroes are no joke). Capping off our hands-on is Slasher Slugger, a clear homage to Friday The 13th's Jason, who presides over a summer-camp-themed level. Here, though, Jacob, the killer, is more American football jock than hockey mask wearer, and double the size, filling the screen.

The level is a neat homage to the movies it riffs on, and we have plenty of time to revel in all the details too, given the number of times he bashes us back to the beginning. And we aren't alone in our failures – staff watching over the demo tell us nobody else who has attempted it has managed to win. We don't change things in our hands-on, though of course someone might have managed it since.

Crucially, though, it doesn't feel unfair. As ever with a roguelike, over time you'll grow more familiar with what the game's demanding of you, and be able to lean on upgrade mechanics to improve your abilities, such as powering up the Slasher Phantoms. It's tough to judge a game like this that thrives on many, many repeated attempts after only a few, but we love the passion and love for classic horror that oozes out of what we get to play.

> "THE BOSS FIGHT IS A HOMAGE TO FRIDAY THE 13TH TITLED SLASHER SLUGGER."

Swery65 has admitted this unlikely collaboration with Suda51 is the result of an impulsive joke between friends made during a Q&A session without any deeper plans in place. Yet now they've actually produced it, it's clear the game itself is no joke. If the full version can match the potential showcased here, this is a hack-and-slash worth waiting for.

IMPRESSIONS

Two legendary Japanese developers have come together for an all-new side-scrolling action title, and early impressions suggest they are on the verge of creating another cult classic.

TRACK RECORD Swery65 is known for his work on horror titles, Deadly Premonition in particular, as well as thoughtful puzzle platformer The Missing, while Suda51 is best known for work on the assassin-battling No More Heroes and Killer7.

4

4 A whole slew of enemies and horror-inspired serial killers await you at this unusual hotel. 5 If this sort of violence is the norm at this hotel, we're giving it a one-star review. 6 As you make renewed attempts to beat each nails-hard level, your strength will increase.

2
with us for longer amounts of time.
Some of our guests even request that we provide various types of bondage for them...
B-b-bondage?!
Oh, you needn't worry, Ms. Bernstein. We never judge our guests, and are happy to fulfill any manner of request.

1 Slasher Phantoms follow your previous moves, meaning you can let them make the first attack before joining the fight. **2** The killers aren't the only ones with unusual tastes. **3** A home run is a dangerous possibility when fighting this boss.

"YOUR JOB IS TO TAKE ON ANY AND ALL DELIVERIES ON BEHALF OF COMPANY WE DELIVER."

The use of '50s Americana gives St Monique character.

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** KONAMI
DEV FAR OUT GAMES / **PLAYERS** 12

Deliver At All Costs

The go go go between

Sure, we all love to complain about delivery companies, but have you tried delivering things yourself? By the time the half-dead marlin flops out of your truck bed for the third time as you try to run it between factories (you're passing it off as a rare white marlin to help a client win over the father of the love of his life), you'll be regretting your words and deeds.

Deliver At All Costs is part isometric driving challenge, part an excuse for the devs to come up with as many bizarre physics-based scenarios as possible. When we say the marlin flops, we mean it – not just threatening to leave our flatbed, but heaving our steering from side to side as it does. Thankfully, we can satiate it briefly by driving through fish food snacks, often handily placed behind destructible objects.

FACTRICK

1. SCHOOL'S OUT

Far Out Games' core team initially got together in order to make a game project for school.

2. SOUPED UP

The garage near your rundown apartment building allows you to upgrade your ride with gadgets.

3. SWITCH OUT

The top-down isometric viewpoint isn't entirely fixed. You can switch side-to-side to change angles.

MONEY PROBLEMS

Needing employment in order to pay the bills between science experiments (you've recently been disgraced for your big ideas), your job is to take on any and all deliveries on behalf of struggling company We Deliver – no matter how silly.

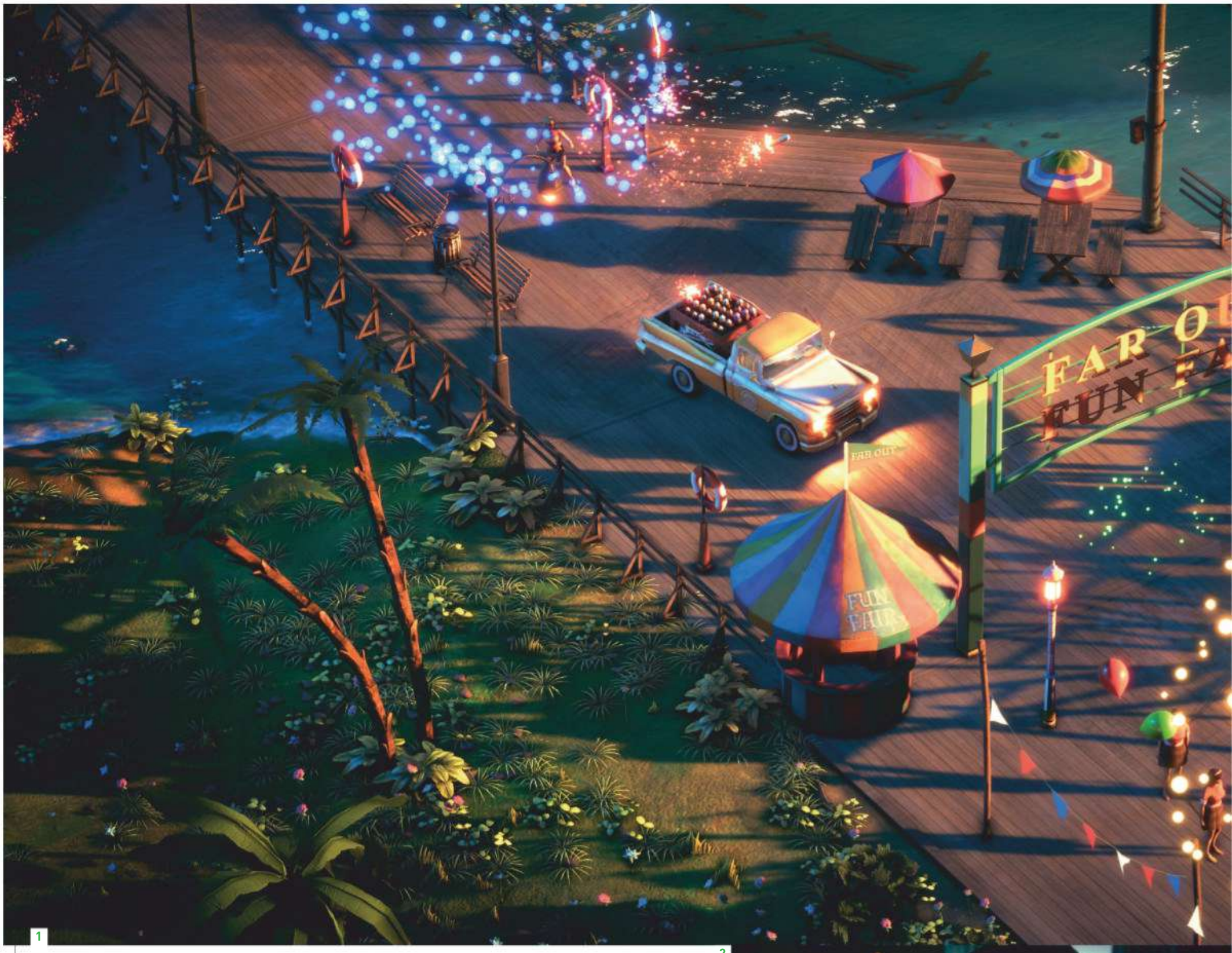
St Monique is a city filled with destructibles to mow down as you make your way from A to B – and your car will also take knocks. Automotive repair is one of your engineering skills, making hopping out to fix deflated wheels that make your ride careen from side to side a matter of holding down a button. Yet, just as citizens need help, they'll get annoyed with your smashing up the town, and will rush at you to give you a piece of their mind, which can get in the way of repairs. Timing a shove just so will knock them over comically, while making them cool off.

This backbone of physics silliness runs parallel to the unique rules of each main mission (and there are plenty of side ones throughout the city as well). Collecting blueprints allows you to develop new ways to play, from mandatory additions to your vehicle such as a crane and winch to the power to automatically open both doors – perfect for slapping whatever you're approaching out of the way. Another allows you to slow down time when cornering, helping you make tight manoeuvres without losing momentum.

The '50s-style America is fun to blast through during our hands-on, each district packed with character and a radio injecting comedy with gag ads done in an olde-timey radio presenter style. (One laxative is described as "like a plunger for your insides.")

While most of the main game is vehicle-based, collectibles and side-missions sometimes require you to explore on foot. Usually this involves rudimentary platforming (somewhat tricky given the isometric viewpoint, which you can swivel between two fixed positions). An early side-mission we

TRACK RECORD Far Out Games is based in Gothenburg, Sweden; this is the studio's debut. The team met while working on a school project. Publisher Konami has previously partnered with other indie developers to release their games.



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take on has us hopping across rooftops, a cheekily placed can of yellow paint explaining why the path forward is marked with the stuff.

DRIVE SILLY

But it's behind the wheel where Deliver At All Costs shines – setting aside the physics silliness, just steering the cars around the world is fun. While the isometric viewpoint makes it different to classic Grand Theft Auto, the eye-in-the-sky approach does evoke a similar feeling – though here the focus is more on lightweight gags than anything malicious. You can take cars you don't own, for example, but only parked ones. Likewise, if you shove members of the public around, they'll tumble but everyone is okay in the end.

Which is all well and good, as quite often you'll wreak chaos across St Monique. In the opening mission you're ferrying a crate of fireworks, which ignite as you drive, causing destruction all around you that you'll have to try to avoid. Another mission requires more precision, as you try to keep a truckload of rotten melons from spilling out onto the streets. There's a counter telling you how many remain, and you've got to keep it above a certain number as you go between locations to spruce up the fruits so they'll appear fresher than they are on behalf of the grocer hawking them.

One favourite has us driving with a bunch of helium balloons tied to the back of the car. These inflate as we go and lift up the rear wheels so we can only steer with the front, and even the slightest jump sends us soaring through the air for seconds at a time. We even get stuck on a railing as we descend, though a pinball-like nudge power allows us to wriggle free. The final challenge in our demo involves measuring a volcanic eruption using a seismograph, all while driving up a mountain as rocks threaten to punt us off the narrow roads that snake up it.

We've yet to see much of the story tying it all together, but so far it's a fun enough thread to follow. Not that we need an excuse to get back behind the wheel when the driving feels this good, and the challenges so creative. We can't wait to see what we have to deliver next.

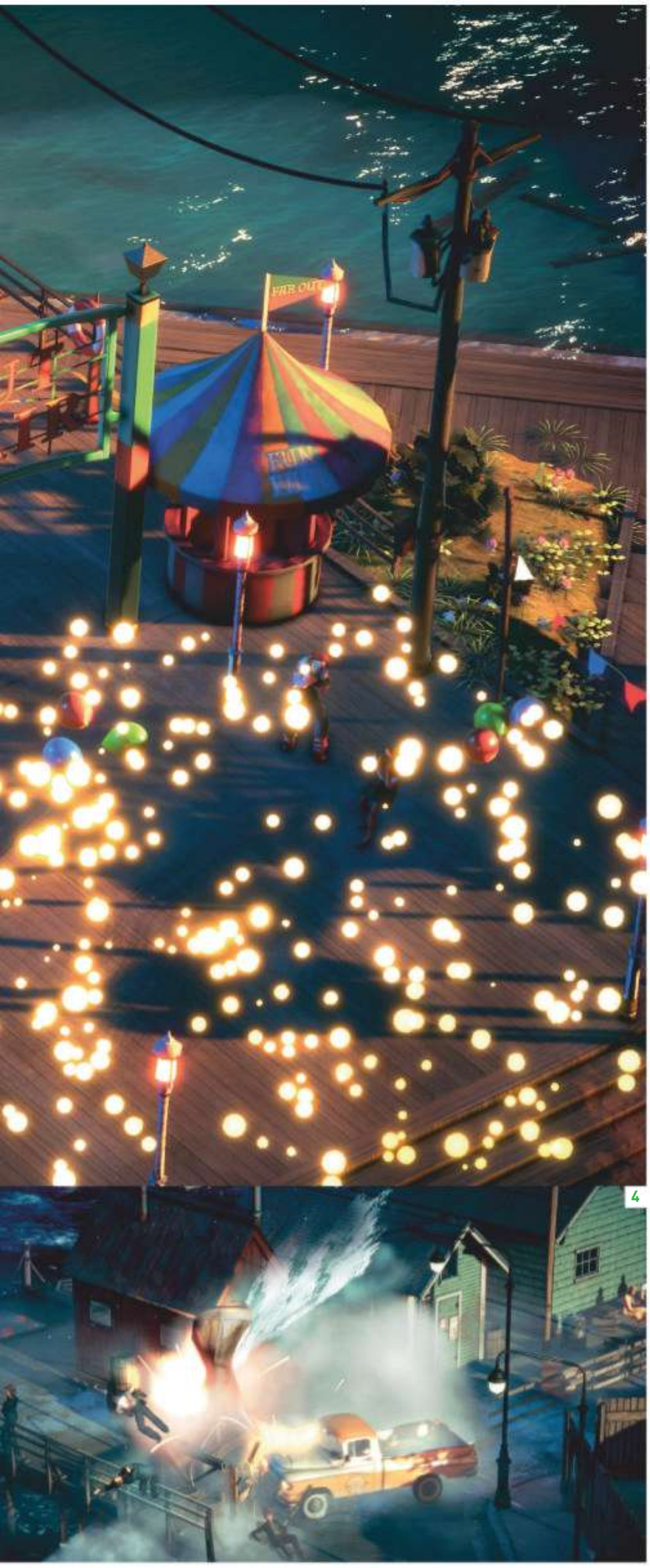
IMPRESSIONS

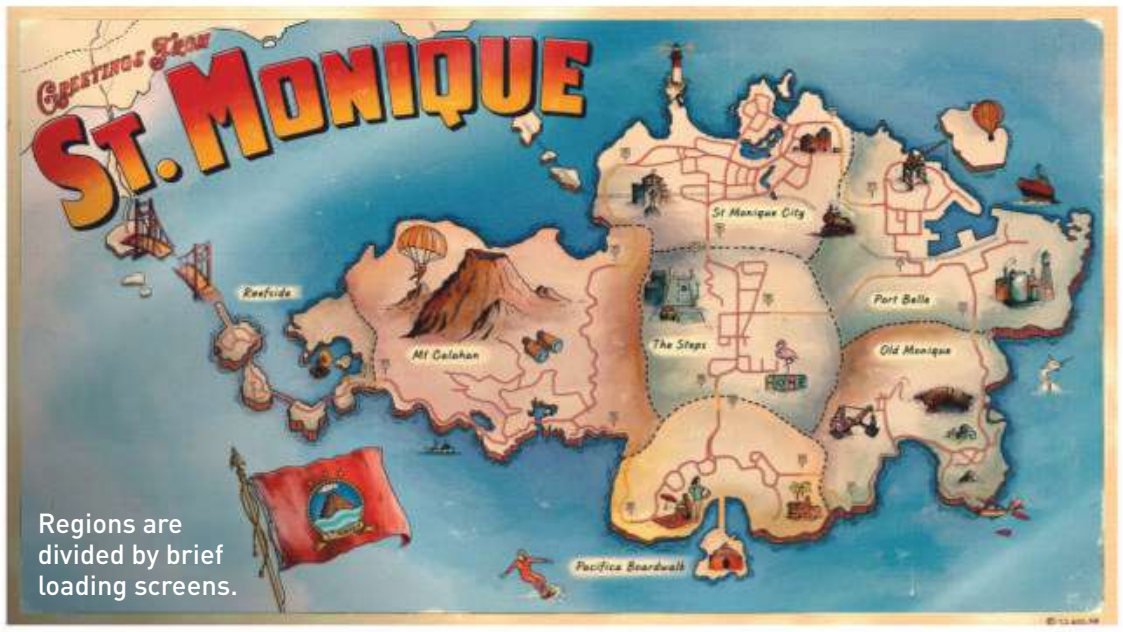
Tight isometric driving meets heaps of creative challenges all based around messing with the physics of putting the pedal to the metal. We have a feeling the full release will, well, deliver.

2

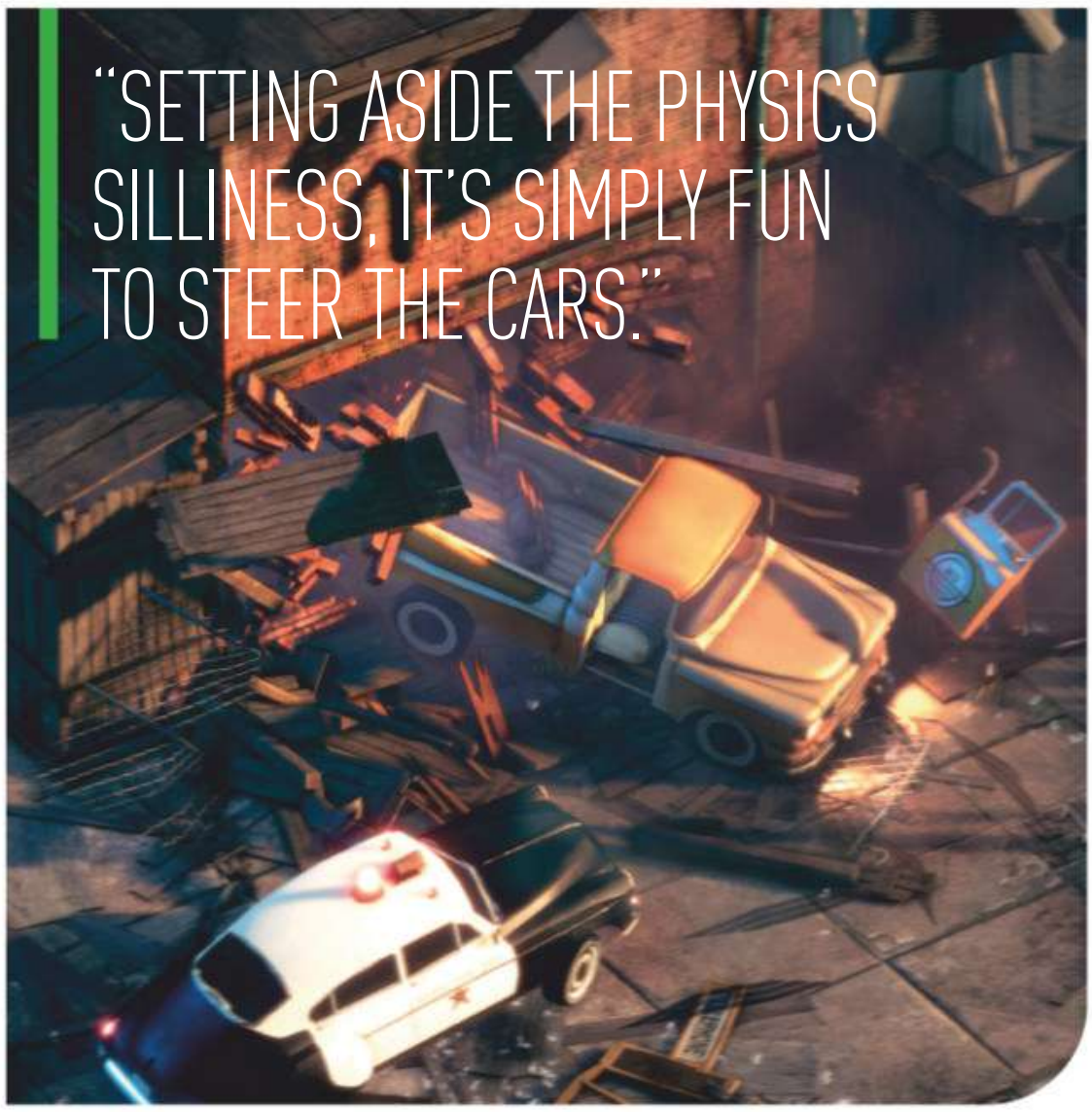
3

1 Slick driving butts against objectives that deliberately try to mess with your ability to do so. It's a fun combination. 2 You're not just helping to put We Deliver back on the map, you're out to prove yourself as an inventor as well. 3 Some goodies can be only reached on foot. St Monique has plenty hidden just out of the way. 4 Your truck is easy enough to repair (even after this!) but having to get out to patch it up will still slow you down.





Regions are divided by brief loading screens.



Job hunting

Some of the deliveries at all costs

01

Delivering a crate of fireworks should be simple, except there's no lid and for some reason they're self-lighting. Explosive, colourful chaos ensues.

02

Helium balloons attached to the back of your truck pull up the rear, putting you believably off-balance as you drive, and giving extra height off jumps.

03

Mount Calahan is erupting. You'll need to get close to it with a seismograph attached to your truck to get helpful readings from it. Just avoid the rocks!

FORMAT PS5, / **ETA** 2025
PUB PANIC / **DEV** OKOMOTIVE / **PLAYERS** 1

Herdling

Over the mountain and far away

Okomotive is a Swiss developer whose games are all about the journey. Rather than nudging vehicles along as in its earlier series, Far, the studio's next project sees you shepherding a livelier crowd. Horned, furry, and presumably quadrupedal – it's a little hard to tell exactly what's going on under those impressive coats – a herd of Calicorns pulls you forward through this pastoral adventure.

You play as a young Calicorn herder, racing alongside this mysterious bunch of bovines on little legs that can scarcely keep up. Bringing up the rear of the pack, you'll venture with them towards a looming mountain range, touring fields capped in a light dusting of snow, misty forests, and more all the way to whatever awaits you at the summit. Your bond with these shaggy beasts is central to the whole thing, and though you hail from completely different species, you'll need to work together to navigate a variety of obstacles throughout a largely abandoned world.

FACTRICK

1. A HANDFUL

A demo of Herdling was playable for the first time at gaming expo PAX West earlier this year.

2. SMALL IS BEAUTIFUL

Okomotive is a tiny studio, employing about 11 full-time staff dedicated to "crafting atmospheric journeys".

3. THE LONG VIEW

Publisher Panic has made direct comparisons between Herdling and Campo Santo's Firewatch.

MAKING TRACKS

The first of these obstacles is, as you may have already guessed, communication. Okomotive's earlier work has leant towards text-lite storytelling, and Herdling takes that one step further, relaying its animal wrangling fable without dialogue. Here there's no hope of trilling a little ditty, Disney-Princess-style, and delighting as your herd whistles while it works. Instead, both biped and quadrupeds need to work together to, for instance, shove abandoned railway infrastructure out of their path. In quieter moments, a scritch behind the ear of your Calicorn as a reward for a job well done doesn't go amiss.

That said, it's hard not to see these sweet moments of affection between herd and herder without our minds tumbling down the rabbithole of all the ways our bovine pals will inevitably become imperilled. It's clear Okomotive isn't looking to rip your heart out with this migratory yarn, but we have no doubt that the ending of this tale will leave us feeling distinctly *moo-ved*.

IMPRESSIONS

Stories about a kid and their creature get us every time – there's always a meaningful journey to be had, if not always a happy ending. We can't wait to set off on this emotional trail next year.

TRACK RECORD Okomotive is best known for its side-scrolling series of Far games, beginning with the dessicated-wasteland-traversing Far: Lone Sails in 2019. Most recently the boat-based Far: Changing Tides pulled into port on PS5 and PS4 in 2022.

"YOUR BOND WITH THESE SHAGGY BEASTS IS CENTRAL TO THE WHOLE THING."

What a view! The scenery only becomes more breathtaking as you run alongside your herd in what Okomotive is calling 'stampede sequences.'

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 10 OCT / **PUB** SEGA, ATLUS / **DEV** STUDIO ZERO, ATLUS / **PLAYERS** 1

Metaphor: ReFantazio

The fantasy Persona we've all been waiting for

An idea so good someone should really have had it before – Metaphor: ReFantazio really feels like someone took the Persona games and transplanted them into a fantasy world. That's no huge surprise, given that developer Studio Zero is helmed by Persona director Katsura Hashino and features other familiar faces such as character designer Shigenori Soejima and composer Shoji Meguro.

You play as a travelling boy who belongs to an oppressed race, and who isn't a silent protagonist this time around – although he uses his words sparingly. Unlike most people, he has neither horns nor elf ears, which marks him out as the member of a lower class. When the king is murdered and the prince, who is something of an adoptive brother to you, cursed with eternal sleep, you join the army to find an informant still loyal to the crown. However, unrest is already spreading across the land, and if you want to help the prince, you may have to go so far as prevent some political scheming. It's messy. It's bloody. It's fantasy at its most realistic, showing the team that didn't pull any punches when it came to talking about Japanese high school life won't hold back here either.

FACTRICK

1. BIG BIRTHDAY

Atlus is celebrating its 35th anniversary with a Metaphor special edition for Asian regions.

2. POLITICAL PERSONA

Instead of making friends using the social links system, you gain followers, which will help you in the election.

3. EVERYDAY FANATSY

Persona's day system is part of Metaphor, we just haven't seen how you can actually spend your time yet.

FEUDAL FANTASY

But Metaphor is more than 'just' Persona in pointy ears and a fantasy costume – it's somehow even more stylish than anything the team have done before. The boss enemy we fight is something out of a nightmare, the menus (always an Atlus strong point) look better than ever, and the music goes incredibly hard.

In its turn-based combat, the length of a turn is determined by how many turn icons you have – each action consumes one. By catching enemies unawares out in the world, you can immediately unleash impressive combo attacks with your squad, ending battles almost before they've even begun. In every battle, the screen shakes with each hit and erupts in lighting effects we never get bored of. As the demo we get to play starts at the very beginning of the game, we haven't seen the half of it yet; Metaphor is going to have a class system, allowing its characters to switch skills, as well as a social system, and we haven't met most of our squad yet, but those we have seem to be – no joke – named after the current Formula 1 roster. The glimpse we've had of the worldbuilding and the fluid combat alone makes us excited for more.

IMPRESSIONS

If our first impressions are justified, this will offer familiar styles and systems, while placing them in a realm that looks so much more interesting than another iteration of Tokyo.

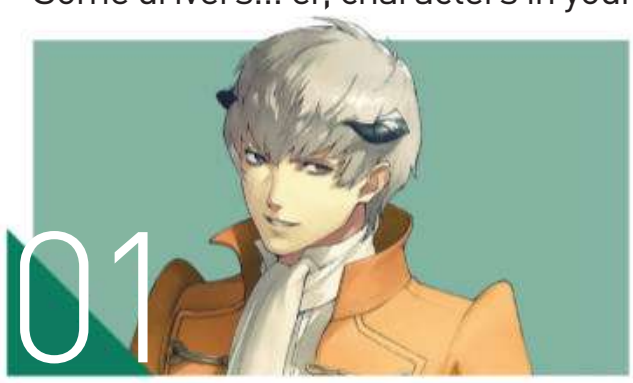
TRACK RECORD Studio Zero is a full subsidiary of Atlus. The developers who form it worked on the likes of Persona, Shin Megami Tensei, and Catherine before splitting off into a new team for this adventure – so we're expecting great things of them.

1 Sneak attacks give you an advantage in battle straight away. 2 The intermittent anime cutscenes are absolutely beautiful. 3 Louis doesn't look like someone who should have the throne. 4 In order to win a desperate battle, you gain the power to call something that looks suspiciously like a Persona.

3
Grius
Louis Guiabern. A prodigal tactician, and a master of magia arts. Some said it was only a matter of time before he made general—the youngest the nation's had.

Teammates assemble

Some drivers... er, characters in your team



Strohl hails from a noble family and can't abide injustice – when he sees you being bullied, he steps in straight away and becomes your army buddy.

Hulkenberg is one of the fiercest warriors you'll meet. This former knight served the prince and loves him as much as the protagonist does.

Heismay hails from the Eugief tribe,which, like your own, is often discriminated against. If you mistake his cuddly appearance for weakness, you'll regret it.

Borderlands 4

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** 2K
DEV GEARBOX / **PLAYERS** TBC

Desperate to wash out the taste of defeat left by this year's Borderlands flick? Well, pull those suckers out of your mouth and get a load of what Gearbox is cooking up – this loot-shooter cure for what ails you. Picture this: a planet with an apparently crystalline ozone layer, then strange meteors and the cracked visage of series setting Pandora shattering the atmosphere as they enter orbit. One meteor survives the hellish re-entry and touches down on the planet's surface. A mechanical hand reaches into frame, gingerly handling the meteor – only to reveal it's a Psycho mask. Something has gone *down* on Pandora, and now it's not just the Vault Hunters' problem...

Mafia: The Old Country

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025 / **PUB** 2K
DEV HANGAR 13 / **PLAYERS** 1

Following three mainline games and some luscious remasters, it's time to take this story back to where it all began: 1900s Sicily. As well as shifting the setting away from North American cities during the 20th century, The Old Country is switching things up gameplay-wise. Whereas Mafia III was set in a massive open world loosely based on New Orleans, this entry promises a 'back to series basics' approach, centring a more linear, narrative-forward experience. Don't misunderstand us, there'll be plenty of gunplay too – just mixed in with an unhealthy dose of politically motivated back-stabbings. As we previously visited Sicily in Mafia II, and a whole campaign was planned there, this is something the devs have put serious time into.

Floatopia

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 2025
PUB NETEASE / **DEV** NETEASE
PLAYERS ONLINE MULTIPLAYER

Ready for our best attempt at a movie trailer voice? All right, here we go: in a world where everybody is special, and everybody has their own superpower, you have... a dead-end job. But worry not, little starry-eyed cherub, because there's a world of colourful, pretty floating islands out there where your undervalued talent can save the day. From decorating up a storm to changing the weather, Floatopia promises a cosy life sim community where you'll fit right in, making friends with other players as well as the adorable NPCs. The less than cosy or cute catch? Gacha mechanics. While the full scope of these has yet to be revealed, their inclusion will no doubt leave a number of players out in the cold.

Lost In Random: The Eternal Die

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** TBC
PUB THUNDERFUL PUBLISHING
DEV THUNDERFUL DEVELOPMENT
PLAYERS 1

After rolling through the first game's unique fairytale world, we've often wondered where this fable will fall next. Focussing on the first game's memorable villainess, the masked Queen Aleksandra, feels a bit like we've rolled double sixes. Here, she's depowered but far from helpless in a high-rolling roguelite adventure. Besides having backup from her own sentient die companion, Fortune, Aleksandra can duck and weave between AOE attacks with the best of 'em, before dashing in close to dole out damage. The focus this time is definitely on snappy action, but we're looking forward to the fresh wrinkles this followup adds to the villainess's story.

Atelier Yumia: The Alchemist Of Memories & The Envisioned Land

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** EARLY 2025
PUB KOEI TECMO / **DEV** GUST
PLAYERS 1

After a slew of sequels to the open world Ryza subseries, and a dreamy followup story for much-beloved alchemist Sophie, Gust is cooking up something brand new. In this decidedly melancholy adventure, the enigmatic Yumia has already lost everything – but she's not about to give up and let go of what was taken from her. On top of whipping up a brew with her alchemist's staff, Yumia can blow away fightier cauldron ingredients with rifle-like blasts of magic. But in this massive fantasy world (featuring fantasy ziplines for zooming around), there are always bigger dragons to fry...

Cuisineer

FORMAT PS5 / **ETA** 28 JAN
PUB MARVELOUS EUROPE
DEV BATTLEBREW PRODUCTIONS
PLAYERS 1

Common sense generally dictates you don't want any furry friends in the kitchen – but we just can't say no to that face. Kitty-eared Pom heads out to the local dungeon to hunt and gather exactly what's for dinner. Through roguelite action, she puts the smackdown on fighty ingredients with her trusty spatula. Rather than the usual elemental strengths and weaknesses, these beasties fall into flavour categories like salty, sour, and bitter. Once obtained, Pom carts them back home to serve in her restaurant (which you can decorate to your heart's content). But both ingredients *and* customers require specialised wrangling, and there's no hope for you if you dare to underestimate the unstoppable force that is the lunch rush.

Skydance's Behemoth

FORMAT PSVR2 / **ETA** TBC / **PUB** SKYDANCE GAMES
DEV SKYDANCE GAMES / **PLAYERS** 1

As Wren the Hunter, you have your hands full crossing blades with bandaged bandits – until unexpected allies present themselves. In addition to shooting, slashing, and lopping off bits of enemies, you can crush the opposition thanks to the massive beasties that skulk across the land. Surrounded? Just lure your foe into the path of the creature and see them crushed underfoot – or worse! Playing with scope all the way down, we can't wait to see how this dark fantasy finally shapes up.

Promise Mascot Agency

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **ETA** 2025
PUB KAIZEN GAME WORKS
DEV KAIZEN GAME WORKS
PLAYERS 1

In this small-town story, an exiled yakuza finds himself responsible for an agency of unruly, unloved mascots. Just so we're clear, you're not helping a down-on-their-luck performer *inside* the costume; in the town of Kaso-Machi, mascots are living beings in their own right. Among them are a severed pinky finger with serious anger issues and a block of Tofu who never stops crying – bless. Between touring the town's open world map, you'll be managing mascots, steering them away from disaster one card-based play at a time. With a little luck, each hand may bring you closer to unravelling the mystery of your exile.

影 ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Art director Thierry Dansereau talks to Scott McCrae about the world of **Assassin's Creed Shadows**

FORMAT PS5
ETA 15 NOV
PUB UBISOFT
DEV UBISOFT QUEBEC
PLAYERS 1

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

This is the first dual-protagonist Assassin's Creed since we played as the Fryes in 2016's Syndicate.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

Almost 17 years have passed since the first Assassin's Creed game launched, and since the millisecond it hit the shelves in 2007, it feels like everyone has been asking, 'But when are they going to do one set in feudal Japan?' In fact, players have asked it so often that one of the first results for 'feudal Japan' on Google is an Assassin's Creed Reddit post.

It's easy to understand why: swap the assassin's robes for a shinobi's shozoku and you've got a ninja game on your hands, plus the architecture of ancient Japan could make for some interesting level design. And yet, despite 12 sequels, a film, and several spinoffs, Assassin's Creed has never taken place in most obvious setting in the world... until now.

We've already been introduced to Assassin's Creed Shadows, being shown how the game's two protagonists Yasuke and Naoe could each approach a given mission (in PLAY #44!), with the former going in loud and proud and the latter doing the old sneaky-stabby.

ART ATTACK

Now, a few months ahead of launch, we're being treated to a closer look at the world our heroes will be exploring, led by Thierry Dansereau, art director at Ubisoft Quebec. It's undeniable that Assassin's Creed Shadows backs up a series that's always been ahead of the curve when it comes to creating historical worlds worth getting lost in. In terms of pure graphical fidelity, it's hard to find many games that match up to it.

THE WEATHER CAN AFFECT THE WORLD AND SO INFLUENCES HOW YOUR CHARACTER APPROACHES A SITUATION.

During the presentation, we're told the art team are striving for three different essential attributes: photorealism, realisation, and dynamism. The first is self-explanatory, and the team even went to Japan to scout out locations to include in the game. Realisation, on the other hand, is described as 'a total attention to detail so as not to break immersion'.

However, dynamism is the factor that intrigues us most. In the game, the weather can affect the world and so it influences how your character approaches a situation – it'll be easier for Naoe to sneak in heavy rain, for example, but her footsteps may make noise in the snow. Other elements in the world are impacted by the seasons; a lake that you're able to swim in at warmer times in the year will be frozen over in the winter, and so on.

Which does leave us wondering how deep it will go. Can snow and »

1 The game centres on Honshu, the largest of the Japanese islands. 2 Seasons will affect the weather and landscape. 3 Buildings will give Naoe a chance to use her grappling hook. 4 It all looks utterly beautiful.

5 Yasuke's armour is ornate and terrifying, befitting one of Japan's elite warriors. 6 Naoe's sneakier by profession, and therefore her dress is the opposite of Yasuke's – she doesn't want to be seen.

ASSASSIN'S CREED SHADOWS

"I THINK IT'S GREAT TIMING, THOUGH, BECAUSE IT ALLOWED US TO REALLY DEVELOP THE NEW-GEN FEATURES."

1 If she can grapple up to a rooftop, Naoe's got a good chance of being able to pass over guards' heads. **2** Naoe and Yasuke can have different approaches to the same situation, suiting their skills.

3 We look forward to exploring this world.
4 The Sengoku era was a brutal one, defined by wars.
5 6 The same location in two different seasons – it'll be interesting to see how the conditions affect how we play.

mud slow you down, or is their presence more of a cosmetic difference? Dansereau tells us that while the animations may change based on the terrain, the team "didn't want it to be like something that could be perceived as very negative or have a negative impact on how you play." Given that other recent open world games have had weather that affects your climbing prowess if it rains (you know the one), it's good to hear that your Assassins will be as nimble as always.

DEATH BY 1,000 CUTS

Another core part of the dynamism shown to us is the wind. Rather than being static, objects like trees and foliage are instead rigged to react naturally to the wind, so if a rainstorm is especially heavy the trees will go wild and leaves will fly all over the place. We're told that the engine can handle over 10,000 on-screen particles at once; however, the footage we're being shown is most likely from an extremely high-end PC.

Given that recent open-world titles have had some performance issues on PS5, we ask Dansereau how this influx of bits and bobs on screen would affect the performance on the console. While we aren't able to get any exact details about PS5 performance (the specifics are still being hammered out), he does say we should "rest assured the visual experience should stay quite even throughout all platforms."

When Yasuke or Naoe swing their swords at any number of objects in the world, they'll cut them to pieces – prop and foliage destruction being another major one of AC Shadows' updates. Many games implement this, but what makes this unique is that it reacts realistically to how you attack the object. A bamboo structure will be cut at the exact angle at which your sword hits it and collapse naturally, while containers will be filled with other objects that come pouring out once opened.

Our mind immediately goes to 2013's Metal Gear Rising: Revengeance, which allowed you to cut at will, and the ways we were able to make use of that. Though don't get your hopes up, as here in-game uses for destructibles seem to be limited. "Most of the architecture is not cuttable," says Dansereau when we ask about cutting out platforms from beneath enemies, though you'll still be able to make a dent in most surfaces. The "katana is the sharpest blade in the world," he adds.

We're also told that the game won't feature any pop-in for static objects. Or, indeed, many static objects at all. We're glad not much will take us by the surprise, at the very least.

ALSO-RAN

One thing that has made a bit of a dent in the need for a Japan-inspired Assassin's Creed is the influx of samurai titles in recent years – games like Nioh, Trek To Yomi, and, of course, Ghost Of Tsushima (which in many ways felt like an Assassin's Creed title). Most of these, of course, took inspiration from similar places (Dansereau

specifically mentions Akira Kurosawa's Ran as an influence upon his design; the film was also a massive influence on Ghost Of Tsushima) and featured similar eras in Japanese history (Yasuke featured in Nioh, for example).

The first thing we want to know was: what took the developers so long to set a game in Japan? As we know, it's been highly requested for years. Dansereau reveals that it's actually Ubisoft HQ that decides where each entry will be set. However, he views this long wait as a bit of a blessing, saying, "I think it's great timing, though, because it allowed us to really develop the new-gen features which I think were much needed for such a setting to fully exploit it", and telling us that the team is really proud that now is the time for Assassin's Creed to hit Japan.

We ask how Assassin's Creed's version of Feudal Japan will stand out from the competition, but Dansereau doesn't seem to make a conscious effort to look at what others have done, telling us, "Assassin's Creed has a rich history of making games, we built the game with the Assassin's Creed pillar in mind," drawing on Ubisoft's experience in open world design. He later acknowledges the fan fervour for this setting, suggesting that "it's part of our natural evolution to make that setting".

Unlike the last game in the series, Assassin's Creed Mirage, which returned to some of the design elements of the earlier games,

SIZE-WISE, DANSEREAU SAYS TO EXPECT A MIDDLE GROUND: "WE'RE TALKING ABOUT [ASSASSIN'S CREED] ORIGINS BIG."

Assassin's Creed Shadows is more of an open world RPG in the style of Origins, Odyssey, and Valhalla. Can an open world get too big? Valhalla verged on it, feeling at times unfathomably large to the point where navigation could become arduous. Dansereau tells us to expect a middle ground: "We're talking about Origins big." After all, with a setting centred on Honshu rather than Japan's entire archipelago, the team have been able to focus. "This is where all the events related to Oda Nobunaga are taking place," Dansereau says by way of explanation – there's no need to overcomplicate and overscope the story the team wants to tell.

Assassin's Creed Shadows is undeniably a looker, and the engine's impressive technical improvements are opening the door to some interesting new game mechanics – though it remains to be seen how they'll feel to play, and whether they can all come together. But, talking with the team, we get the sense that the Japan setting is as much a dream come true for the creatives bringing it to life as it is to the fans who have been requesting it for years. ■

1 We already know Naoe can swim under water, breathing through a reed. 2 Between battles, Japan will take your breath away. 3 Yasuke's ready to take them all on. 4 Yasuke, overdressed for the occasion.

5 The flower on the front of Yasuke's armour is the Oda clan crest. 6 Fights against other samurai look set to test Yasuke's prowess – they're far from your run-of-the-mill grunts.

THE 15 BEST SAMURAI GAMES

The humble samurai is one of gaming's most enduring characters, with many games paying homage to them – so here's the ultimate list of what you should play to embody the fantasy yourself

After years of waiting, it's finally time for Assassin's Creed, the game that leaves no historical stone unturned, to make a samurai the hero. Before it launches or you run out of episodes of Shogun to watch, there are plenty of great samurai games you can already play.

Few focus solely on samurai, often mixing in ninja, sometimes as additional characters and sometimes by allowing a conflicted hero to grow multiple skill trees. Whether you're looking for a story of the ultimate honourable samurai travelling the land or you just want to do some expert slicing and dicing, there's plenty for you to take a stab at with these picks that best embody the spirit of samurai in our eyes.

RISE OF THE RONIN

Format PS5 **Pub** Sony **Dev** Team Ninja **Released** 2024

10

It's fair to say that Rise Of The Ronin had the potential to be the next Sekiro – the latter has the market for open-world samurai action pretty much cornered. Rise Of The Ronin is great at the action part too, because it lets you choose from an impressive array of weapons, fighting styles, and special attacks, all of which feel smooth and satisfying. And while it takes cues from FromSoftware's games, it nevertheless manages to feel more approachable. The story, which takes place towards the end of the Edo period, is set up in a way that makes it easy enough to follow even if you aren't a Japanese history buff, and it's well-acted (if not particularly well-written), with oodles of side-content to get lost in.

SAMURAI SHODOWN

Format PS4 **Pub** Athlon Games **Dev** SNK **Released** 2019

9

Samurai Shodown's a longstanding series of classic 2D arcade fighters; its sixth instalment, on PS2, was probably the best-known entry before SNK rebooted the series in 2019. The latest game is only the second in the series to use 3D graphics. What makes Samurai Shodown so special is the way it makes you think about attacks rather than constantly entangling limbs. Longer-range medium attacks, dangerous heavy attacks, or quick light attacks; every strike has a purpose, every connection the chance to slice away chunks of an enemy health bar. With a focus on deadly exchanges rather than lengthy combos it's surprisingly approachable, giving players of every skill level plenty of opportunities for strategising.

Flashy effects can sometimes make action a bit too chaotic.

FATE/SAMURAI REMNANT

Format PS5, PS4 **Pub** Koei Tecmo **Dev** Omega Force **Released** 2023

8

Omega Force knows how to make a samurai musou (as shown elsewhere on this list), but it's also brought its 1v100 magic to the Fate series. Samurai/Remnant is of a piece with the rest of Fate, telling a solemn story with some incredible anime flourish in its battle scenes.

Fate always revolves around magicians who summon historical figures as partners for a battle royale, with the last one standing earning a wish from a 'holy grail'. While the series began with a modern-day setting, it's the perfect fit for a historical story of a lone ronin who has to learn the ways of magic to have a chance at winning the Waxing Moon Ritual. Where Rise Of The Ronin's story is not too hard to follow, Fate/Samurai Remnant is dense with characters and their individual struggles. It's so loaded with narratives to follow that some of it ends up offloaded to a New Game+ mode. A first playthrough isn't exactly short, either.

Omega Force's combat chops mesh wonderfully with the premise, bringing these larger-than-life clashes to life with punchy battles that have you weaving together special sword strikes and magical blasts alongside your partner Servant. With mostly new characters (and a few cameos), you don't need to be a Fate superfan to enjoy this entry – though if you are, you'll undoubtedly get the most out of it.

LIKE A DRAGON: ISHIN

Format PS5, PS4 **Pub** Sega **Dev** Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio **Released** 2023

7

七

With one Like A Dragon (formerly Yakuza) game after another getting remade or at least remastered, fans asked for a reworked Ishin the loudest. It transplants LAD characters into the Bakumatsu era (1850s–60s in the West) and makes them into historical figures. Kiryu steps into the shoes of famous usurper Sakamoto Ryoma.

The result is a game that walks the line between feeling like a typical Like A Dragon story with historical trappings, and vice versa. Either way there are plenty of references waiting for fans, and it's quite frankly a huge surprise how well the Like A Dragon world fits into a new setting far from its neon-lit red light district home. The remake features a lot of minigames, which fans have come to expect with new series entries, but all with a feudal Japan twist, to break up your more serious quest to infiltrate a group of assassins (the equivalent of the modern-day yakuza).

VICIOUS RYOMAS

While the samurai elements are fun, you meet plenty of historical figures and, importantly for this list, while Ishin delivers a lot of drama, it's also very funny – humour's something a lot of samurai games have no room for.

Despite these twists, Ishin can still feel like a well-trodden path; the way it feels like the LAD you know and love can be a boon at some times, but can grate at others – we've been there and done that many times before. Edo itself can eventually seem a bit empty compared to modern Tokyo. The upside is that Ryoma's swordplay is genuinely different to Kiryu's usual fisticuffs, and cutting through legions of foes is satisfying and funny in how they ragdoll. Plus, there's room here for absurd elements like deflecting cannonballs.

Even the best samurai might quail when faced with a tiger, but Ryoma will take care of it (Kiryu has, after all, taken plenty down).

"THE LIKE A DRAGON WORLD FITS WELL INTO THIS NEW SETTING FAR FROM ITS NEON-LIT HOME."

SAMURAI WARRIORS 4

Format PS4, PS3 **Pub** Koei Tecmo **Dev** Omega Force **Released** 2014

6

The Samurai Warriors series is a spinoff of the Dynasty Warriors games that made Omega Force famous (the developer essentially invented the musou genre, where you cut through a massive number of enemies with flashy special attacks). Samurai Warriors 4 stands out as both the best entry and the last one before a downturn in quality for the series. Samurai battles are made to be played this way – it's fantastically satisfying to plough through large groups of enemies with one hero, thanks in particular to SW4's hyper attacks and fast and fluid character switching. While combat feels anime-like, Samurai Warriors 4 does feature some Japanese history deep cuts and a storyline that'll actually teach you quite a bit.

SHADOW TACTICS: BLADES OF THE SHOGUN

Format PS4 **Pub** Daedalic Entertainment **Dev** Mimimi Productions **Released** 2017

5

Samurai are only part of the group of feudal Japanese warriors you get to control in Shadow Tactics, a real-time tactics game with a top-down view of huge maps covering some beautiful Japanese locations. You control a group of characters with different skills, among them a samurai and a few ninja, and try to infiltrate bases belonging to Kage-sama, a new warlord in (Edo) town. Shadow Tactics' big strengths are its emergent stories, mixing the unpredictability of enemies with creative tools that make you feel like you overcome challenges your way.

Beautiful *and* bloody. Few open worlds are as constantly visually awe-inspiring as Ghost Of Tsushima's.

GHOST OF TSUSHIMA

Format PS5 (Director's Cut), PS4 **Pub** Sony **Dev** Sucker Punch Productions **Released** 2019

4

For a long time, while Western developers were in love with open world games, Japanese ones preferred to focus elsewhere. Perhaps that's why Sucker Punch, a US studio with open world experience, was the one to finally give us the chance to actually *be* the wandering samurai fighting for justice. Ghost tells the story of Jin, a lone samurai who does whatever is necessary to free his master and his land – the island of Tsushima – from the invading Mongol army.

It's stuffed with the usual open world fare, but is stunning, each part of the island looking lush, from grassy plains rustling in the breeze to red-leaved forests all but glowing. A minimal HUD ensures it all pops, allowing you to lose yourself in the adventure. The story itself is punchy, if predictable – especially as its tale of power and revenge can feel a little close to that of Infamous: Second Son. But it's easy to overlook that when it feels this good to be a samurai. The snappy but accessible combat plays a big part in this. It delivers a power fantasy; towards the end of the game Jin feels almost unstoppable, but also like he's genuinely learned and grown during his journey.

It's often described as 'like Ubisoft finally did an Assassin's Creed in Japan'. This year we'll see how it stacks up against the real thing.

How many other games let you play as a time-travelling, whip-cracking Jean Reno?

ONIMUSHA 3: DEMON SIEGE

Format PS2 **Pub** Capcom **Dev** Capcom **Released** 2004

No list of samurai games would be complete without Onimusha, and 2018's lacklustre HD remake of the first Onimusha probably cost us a recreation of the true star in the series: Onimusha 3. Samurai Samanosuke Akechi had previously reached his goal of defeating Oda Nobunaga, but because Capcom wanted to have one last go at appealing to Western players with the series… er, don't worry about it – something, something, black magic… and Nobunaga is revived. Which also has the consequence of sending Samanosuke to early 2000s Paris. In his place, a police officer called Jacques Blanc gets transported to 16th-century Japan.

Onimusha 3 is probably one of the most cinematic games to come out in a generation stacked with them, and we mean this literally, as it uses well-known actors not only for voice acting, but also for motion capture and facial models. Japanese-Taiwanese actor Takeshi Kaneshiro, who had already worked as a voice actor for Samanosuke on the first Onimusha, now also lent him his body, while Jean Reno took on the role of Blanc. Kaneshiro was very popular for films like House Of Flying Daggers and Reno had starred in hits such as The Professional and Mission Impossible. Seeing actors' likenesses in games is normal to us now, but it was something special at the time, drawing the attention of those who otherwise didn't play many games. For Onimusha 3 Capcom also adapted some real-life locations, as well as placing the hack-and-slash action within fully rendered 3D environments instead of the pre-rendered, Resi-like backgrounds that were standard.

CAPCOMPETITION

Setting aside the impact Onimusha 3 had on game development, it's still heaps of fun, even if its innovations feel less remarkable now. With over-the-top action, it's often very silly while simultaneously taking itself very seriously, a trait it shares with other Capcom greats such as Dino Crisis. It uses multi-character storytelling that's reminiscent of Resident Evil, and combat that had been overtaken in feel and style by Devil May Cry (though Blanc's show-stealing toothed whip is a worthy rival to DMC's own inventive weapons). Unlike the red-coated Dante, Blanc and Samonosuke's antics rarely go full anime, but aren't exactly historically accurate either. Onimusha 3 is the videogame equivalent of a popcorn movie that influenced games at large in more ways than you'd think.

But wait, there's more

Other great games where carrying a sword is the point

Final Fantasy XIV: Stormblood
Fans have called for this job in FFXIV from the beginning, and their call was heeded. Samurai in FFXIV are combo specialists, thanks to their unique sen gauge.

Hakuoki: Kyoto Winds
Samurai often appear in visual novels, and one of the best VNs you can play is Hakuoki: Kyoto Winds. You can smooch samurai vampires. Need we say more?

For Honor
Having different historical warriors battle it out is a brilliant idea, and For Honor is especially good at making each feel distinct to play, including the samurai.

Shadow Warrior 2
What if FPS stood for First-Person Sworder as well as First-Person Shooter? Loaded with blades, this quirky shooter is about causing as much carnage as possible.

Tenchu: Stealth Assassins
Before the Souls games there was Tenchu, a collaboration between Acquire and FromSoftware that made us wish Sekiro had featured even more stealth.

Being half-demon gives you special powers, but sword skills are more than enough for most foes.

NIOH 2

Format PS5, PS4 **Pub** Koei Tecmo **Dev** Team Ninja **Released** 2020

2

Want to feel like a powerful samurai without getting a history lesson thrown in? Then Nioh 2 is the perfect game, because it boasts amazing swordplay and you can mostly ignore its convoluted story. To be fair, the devs made a valiant effort to fit its yokai-laden plot into the Sengoku era of Japanese history – it's just that the action is so good you want to keep tearing demons apart rather than worrying about it. The real story you'll be telling people is how after multiple deaths you finally beat a possessed castle. This is the stuff games can do like no other medium.

As the studio behind Ninja Gaiden and Dead Or Alive, Team Ninja had a reputation for making great fighting games before Nioh, and you can see and feel that expertise. It's a beautiful game, too, if not in environments then definitely in combat, from your customisable character to the many monsters from Japanese folklore who appear both as your enemies and as powerful summons. Collecting soul cores from enemies enables you use their skills as your own attacks, which makes Nioh 2 feel like a near-endlessly customisable experience (until you die and lose your resources).

Nioh 2 is immensely difficult, but without feeling like a purely skill-based challenge. If you're willing to dig into its systems, you'll find a recipe to defeat each enemy, even though in practise it will still require many deaths to successfully apply a strategy. And with the power to use demons of your own, you can apply some of the same unfair, health-bar-destroying tactics as the bosses. Designing enemies that withstand such a level of customisation is no small feat, and overall, while still very difficult, Nioh 2 feels like a game you can learn to beat equally via your motor skills as your stat crunching skills. When it comes to giving you the tools to approach combat your own way, nobody can cross blades with Nioh 2 and hope to come out unscathed.

"THE REAL STORY YOU'LL BE TELLING PEOPLE IS HOW AFTER MULTIPLE DEATHS YOU FINALLY BEAT A POSSESSED CASTLE."

SEKIRO: SHADOWS DIE TWICE

Format PS4 **Pub** Activision **Dev** FromSoftware **Released** 2019

This epic about the travels of shinobi called Wolf was FromSoftware's way of evolving its own formula, resulting in the developer's best game until, well, its next best game. 'Now wait,' we can hear you say, 'a shinobi isn't a samurai, it's a ninja, that's completely different – why isn't this on the list of the best ninja games?' Well, just like Jin Sakai, when Wolf loses everything in the game's introduction, he has to reforge who he is in the absence of his young master and left arm. Combining both ninja and samurai techniques, he walks a new, bloody path that sees him constantly re-evaluating his own values.

The best thing about Sekiro is how excellently this works into its play, smooth movement enabling you to constantly mix the stealthiness of a ninja for one-hit kills on regular enemies with samurai swordfighting skills for some truly epic duels (Isshin, The Sword Saint, we still have nightmares about you).

Whether it's taking advantage of your handy grappling hook or simply the power of crouching (not easy with our gamer backs), you'll explore most areas stealthily, taking advantage of surprise attacks wherever possible, similar to the way you would in Assassin's Creed, but no stealth attack in the world will rid you of some of the large monsters and ghostly apparitions you'll face.

Sekiro introduced the need for flexible reactions, deflecting blows, sidestepping, and jumping in response to different attacks. It also introduced the idea of posture damage before we saw the idea as stamina in Nioh 2, allowing for tactical gameplay that factors in the possibility that you might have to unbalance an enemy first (deal posture damage) before you can do health damage, or vice versa.

"ENABLES YOU TO MIX THE STEALTHINESS OF A NINJA WITH SAMURAI SWORDFIGHTING SKILLS FOR SOME TRULY EPIC DUELS."

TWICE IS NICE

It is this combination of approaches that makes the swordfighting in Sekiro feel so realistic, together with some great animations that make you feel the weight of the blade, and sound design that terrifically captures the moment steel hits steel. The pings of deflection become rhythmic as you time out the chains of enemy attacks before you open them up for damage. Add to this the prosthetic arm, which gives you access to even more traditional Japanese weapons, and you'll find there is a lot more to a Japanese arsenal than a sword and maybe some shuriken.

Compared to FromSoftware stablemates Dark Souls or Bloodborne, Sekiro can feel like a jaunty stroll on a summer's day – not where the combat is concerned, mind, but it has plenty of daylight and some really beautiful locations. For a FromSoftware game, its storytelling is also pretty straightforward, introducing you to plenty of uniquely Japanese monsters and other noble warriors who have sworn oaths to their masters and can't just let you do as you please. Sekiro highlights the human cost of the brutality of the Sengoku era it so ruthlessly portrays, and it shows that perhaps, honour isn't everything unless you can help others along the way. ■

So much for sneaking, but Wolf is just as proficient in a straightforward fight.

SAMURAI GAMES

How Wolf resolves his inner conflicts is reflected in multiple endings. But either way, much will burn.

FORMAT PS4 **ETA** OUT NOW **PUB** CAPCOM **DEV** CAPCOM **PLAYERS** 1

Edge case

Ace Attorney Investigations Collection translates Miles Edgeworth's complete adventures into English for the first time. Capcom's Shunsuke Nishida, Kenichi Hashimoto, and Janet Hsu submit the evidence to Malindy Hetfeld

Who would've thought that five years after Phoenix Wright yelled "Objection!" on PlayStation for the first time, the entire series would be available to us? From the sound of it, not even Capcom thought this feat possible – following the release of the Phoenix Wright Trilogy and the Great Ace Attorney spinoffs, the company polled fans on whether it should release its remasters of the other main games in the series, now assembled in the Apollo Justice Trilogy. Perhaps it was this initial reluctance that made the announcement of Ace Attorney Investigations Collection (collecting both Ace Attorney Investigations: Miles Edgeworth and Ace Attorney Investigations: Prosector's Gambit) such a surprise, but sometimes if you ask, Capcom delivers.

"In mid-2022, when we were still developing the Apollo Justice

ACE ATTORNEY INVESTIGATIONS COLLECTION

Iwamoto's new art for the collection combines all the stars of both games for the first time.

ACE ATTORNEY INVESTIGATIONS COLLECTION

Collection, we noticed a lot of requests from fans to port these games," the collection's producer, Shunsuke Nishida, says, "so we decided to get the project going and deliver them as soon as we could."

MILES AHEAD

As the name suggests, both games star chief prosecutor Miles Edgeworth. Miles has become a fan favourite, probably because he is the perfect foil to nearly every character, including Ace Attorney's regular protagonist, Phoenix Wright. Edgeworth develops from a fairly straightforward antagonist into a much-needed source of outside opinions – where the defence brings the chaos, Miles brings a more calm, detached, and logical view to the proceedings.

Set after the first three Ace Attorney games, in these ones Miles has plenty of time to ponder his own role as an antagonist. Never a true villain, he was raised with a different perspective on justice, one that the events of those games has made him question. Here he's on a journey to rediscover his calling, and his career as a prosecutor (while stumbling upon a series of crimes he must solve, naturally).

Investigations plays similarly to Ace Attorney proper, with the important difference that you never enter the courtroom. Instead, you're visiting crime scenes. Gone is prodding around scenes from static first-person viewpoints, as the investigation sequences have you controlling Miles as he wanders back and forth, zooming in for a closer view only when necessary. Collected clues can be examined more closely, as in previous games, but now select clue phrases can be stored in order to smush them together to make a deduction, changing what you know about the evidence or unravelling new threads to pull at.

Extensive concept art and documentation gives fascinating insight into development.

Which doesn't mean all you're doing is sniffing around for clues. Official trials are off the table, but Miles still engages in conversations where he listens to characters' testimonies and tries to find fatal flaws in their arguments.

According to Nishida, the idea of setting an Ace Attorney game completely outside the court room inspired Investigations. "At the time we wanted to make a game set in the world of Ace Attorney but not based in the courtroom, so we decided on a mystery where you'd investigate crime scenes. When it came time to discuss among the development team and decide who would be the protagonist, we reached the conclusion that it had to be Edgeworth," he says.

"WE WANTED TO MAKE A GAME SET IN THE WORLD OF ACE ATTORNEY BUT NOT BASED IN THE COURTROOM, SO WE DECIDED ON A MYSTERY."

TELL ALL

Like the previous remasters, the Investigations Collection features a story mode in which the activities are completed automatically for you. You can switch story mode on and off at will to get past elements you might be stuck on, for example. Whereas previous games only had text choices to skip, the stronger focus on investigative action here made the story mode more difficult to implement, as Nishida tells us.

"Being able to control Edgeworth and move around freely during those scenes proved difficult when it came to implementing the story mode and the feature that shows a checkmark on places you've already checked," he says. "Since each player will move around in different ways, obtain items and speak to characters in a different order, adding these new features in a way that wouldn't cause any bugs was quite the challenge."

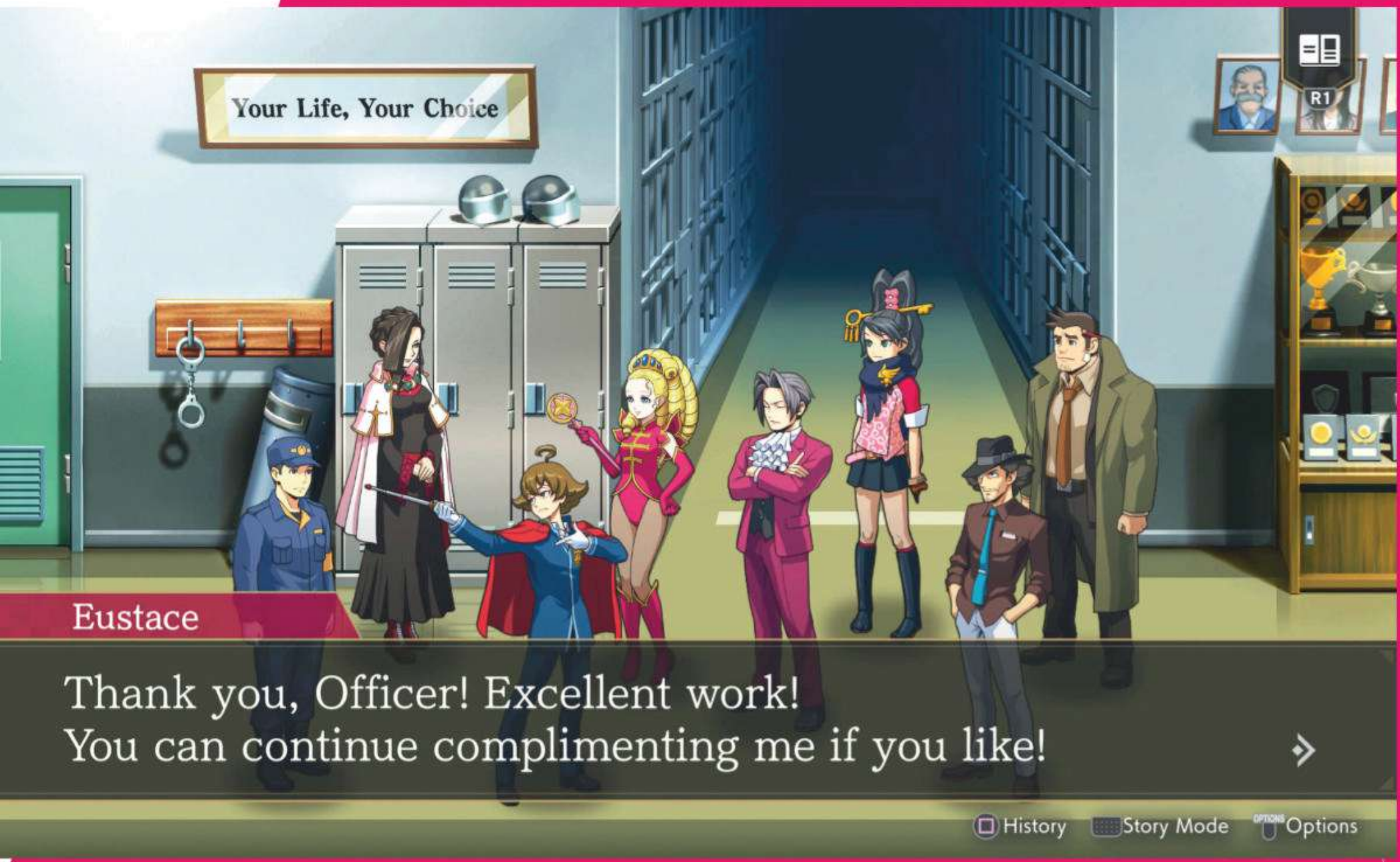
In order to solve this problem, the game resets slightly to the very beginning of an investigation scene if you turn on story mode while investigating. This makes it possible for the game to clear an investigation in a predetermined way.

Once Capcom had made the decision to make Edgeworth the main character, it was he who inspired some of the new gameplay elements you can find in Investigations. Edgeworth is very calm and collected – unlike Phoenix Wright, he will never scramble for an improbable outcome. Wright objects before he speaks, whereas Edgeworth thinks things through. You get to do the thinking by doing things like combining clues, as mentioned, or playing logic chess.

Logic chess is like a battle of wills. Whenever someone absolutely doesn't want to spill the beans, Edgeworth will trick them into admitting to something simply by testing his various hypotheses or even waiting to see if his opponent grows more nervous over time. Only someone like Edgeworth could put on the pressure in this way.

"Since Edgeworth is a prosecutor rather than a defence attorney, his position on the case differs greatly, be it in court or during the investigation at the crime scene," Nishida says. "In terms of the tone, I think it is still the classic Ace Attorney mixture of serious and comical moments."

Plenty of humorous moments feel of a piece with the rest of the series, from an theme park built around the police force's goofy Blue Badger mascot to a fancy



1 Eustace is the sort of guy you love to humble, making him a great foil for Edgeworth. 2 AAI's third-person take on Investigation scenes help bring scenes to life. 3 Court's *not* in session, but reasons to shout 'objection' are thankfully still plentiful.

Supporting all-stars

On his investigations, Edgeworth is helped (and hindered) by friends old and new

Dick Gumshoe

Good old Dick may not have the biggest brain, but he has the biggest heart – he is always around throughout Investigations to support Edgeworth. Mostly emotionally.

Verity Gavèlle

Should a judge be investigating crime scenes and taking the young Eustace under her wing? Probably not, but arguing with her isn't easy given her telescopic gavel and lack of patience. Cross her and she'll have you disbarred.

Shi-Long Lang

A rival investigator from the land of Zheng Fa, Lang does things very differently from Edgeworth. Lang isn't too interested in the truth, and is quick to come to a conclusion and call it a day, which makes investigating crimes rather difficult.

Eddie Fender

A former colleague of Edgeworth's father, the two share a past – but do they share a future? As a defence attorney he stands on the other side of the fence to Edgeworth. Cool as a cucumber, what does 'justice' mean for him?

Eustace Winner

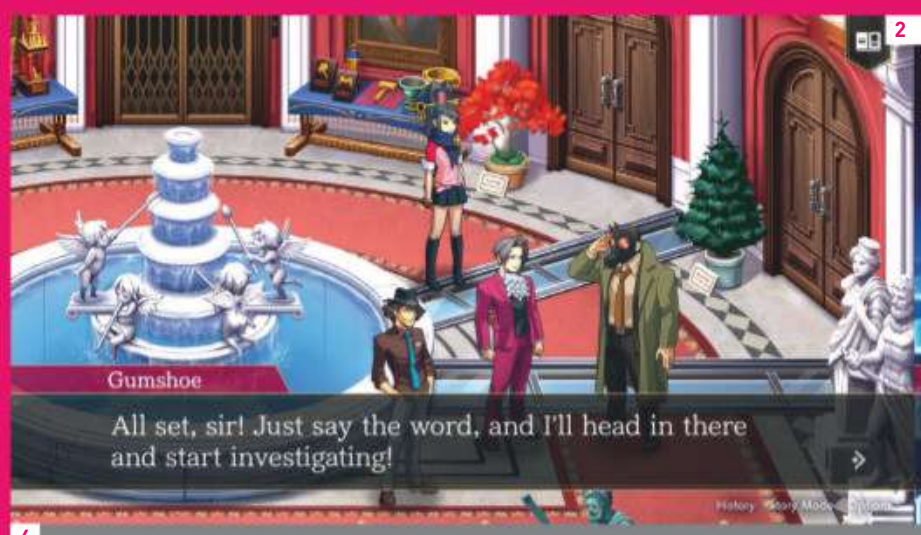
A self-styled prosecuting prodigy, Eustace is the prosecutor office's rising star – just as Edgeworth was in his younger years. Gets under Edgeworth's skin thanks to being a brat, but does he just hit too close to home?

Kay Faraday

The 17-year-old "great thief" steals nothing but the truth. Connected to Miles Edgeworth through a past event, Kay is there to help the prosecutor like the great Maya Fey helped Wright.

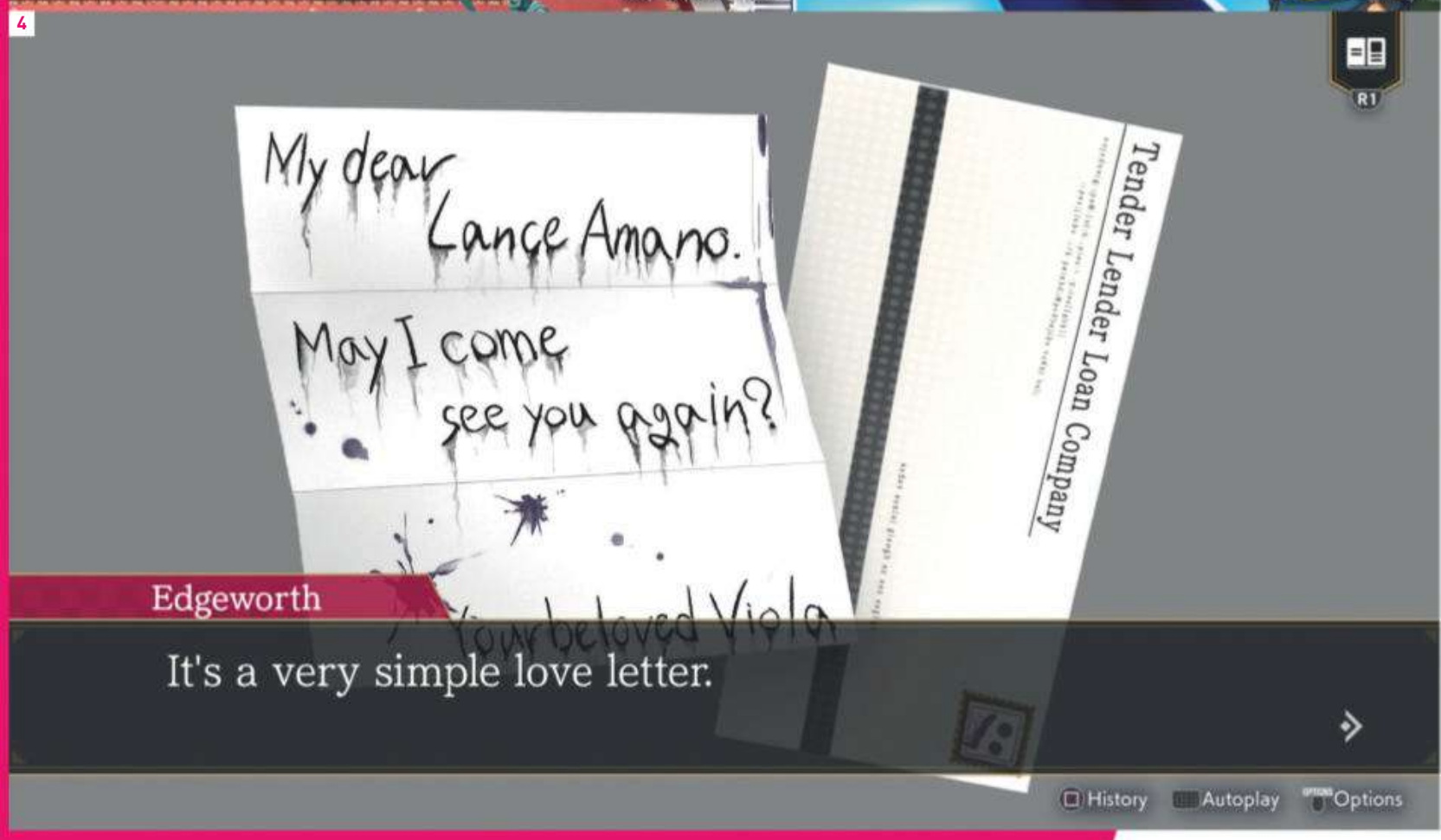
1

1 Edgeworth doesn't suffer fools gladly, which is where Eddie comes in as a useful, chiller ally. 2 This is an art gallery that was once a famous TV chef's mansion and culinary competition ground before a shocking murder. Your average Ace Attorney day out. 3 Clues can be baited out from conversations which, to Edgeworth, is like playing chess. 4 Take a closer look at any clues you've found and you can open new avenues for investigation.

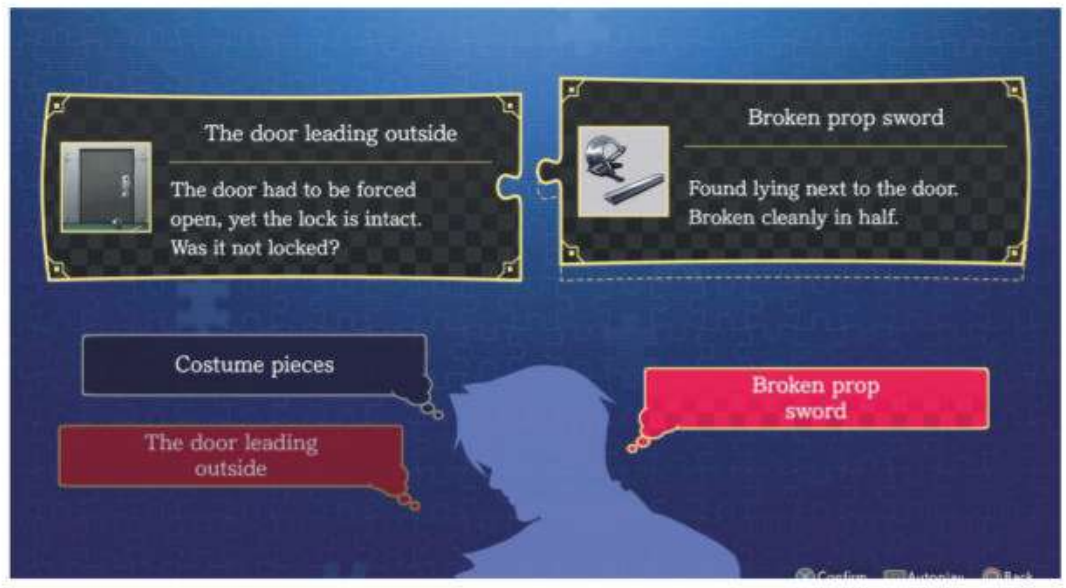


2 3

4



» aeroplane adorned with statues, and a cast of eccentric witnesses. The investigations themselves feel slightly more grounded, however, thanks to Edgeworth's more methodical approach – which also makes these games feel easier to play. There are fewer instances that feel like pure guesswork; Investigations is the closest Ace Attorney has come to a detective game.


The door leading outside
The door had to be forced open, yet the lock is intact. Was it not locked?
Broken prop sword
Found lying next to the door. Broken cleanly in half.
Costume pieces
The door leading outside
Broken prop sword
Once you've found clues, you can start putting together the solution to the mystery.

EDGE-WORTHY PUNS

Similar to The Great Ace Attorney duology, which wasn't released in the West until the games had been remastered as a collection, this will be the first time fans can play an official release of Ace Attorney Investigations' sequel, which previously only existed as a fan translation. According to Capcom localisation director Janet Hsu, the localisation team at no point referred to the fan version.

"We have certain procedures that we have to follow when we localise any of our titles. Therefore we didn't reference the fan translation during the process and strove to create our own original localisation that we hope the fans will come to love as well," she says.

For fans who know the fan effort, this means getting used to new names for the characters. Giving characters pun names is one of the specialities of the English localisation of all Ace Attorney games, and there are some great Easter egg pun names for you to discover in Investigations. Hsu gave us a glimpse of how much thought goes into some of these names, for example in the case of Eustace Winner, a rookie prosecutor Miles butts heads with in the second game.

"We usually base the character names on their Japanese names and try to carry over as much as we can. In the event we can't, we try to build puns off of some other prominent aspect of their personality or design," Hsu says. "Eustace Winner, whose Japanese name is Yumihiko Ichiyanagi, thinks he's hot stuff and uses the 'ichi' ('one') in his surname in a lot of puns. Knowing this going in, Winner is a real last name, so it just sort of screamed 'use me' at us. As for 'Eustace', his Japanese name Yumihiko is meant to sound like a spoiled rich kid's name, but his whole name is also meant to be a pun on 'pulling a bow with no arrow' (ichi ya naki yumi wo hiku) – a fancy way to say 'someone who always misses the mark'. Hence, the poor kid's first name, 'Eustace', is also meant to sound like 'useless'."

Investigations is also full to the brim of references to the very first Ace Attorney games, to the point it makes most sense to enjoy the Investigations Collection after playing the Phoenix Wright Trilogy, which it follows. Familiar characters include Dick Gumshoe, the hapless detective who's always in danger of having his salary cut, Edgeworth's adoptive sister Franziska von Karma, and more we don't want to give away at this point.

FAN SERVICE

The extras included with the collection make it clear that this is a remaster designed with fans in mind. Similar to Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney trilogy, you can enjoy some extras such as the game's soundtrack, a sprite gallery, and a trove of promotional images and sketches. According to Nishida, some of this material was only previously available in Japan, so it's nice that Western fans get access, if only digitally.

The games also now feature a newly arranged soundtrack and some beautifully animated character sprites for investigation scenes. Blocky pixel art in the original, the old sprites suited the small screens they were designed for, but these new chibi designs look great on the big screen and are packed with personality. However, if you want to experience the classic soundtrack and sprites for yourself, both can be toggled on.

"The original pixel art was made to a very high standard and has its own detail and charm, so we wanted to allow people to enjoy it alongside the newly created art," Nishida says. "Anyone who played the original game back in the day will no doubt find the pixel art nostalgic, while younger players playing for the first time may find that style to be something fresh they aren't used to. We actually used the pixel art from the mobile ports for this game, so the character silhouettes are a little smoother than the Nintendo DS originals."

There is also brand new promotional art from character designer Tatsuro Iwamoto. The new art, which you can enjoy at the start of this feature, follows the idea of previous collections by showing all of the characters together, but it's also significant for fans who already know one striking image from the games.

"THE ORIGINAL PIXEL ART WAS MADE TO A VERY HIGH STANDARD AND HAS ITS OWN DETAIL AND CHARM, SO WE WANTED TO ALLOW PEOPLE TO ENJOY IT."

"The concept was to take the in-game artwork where you see Edgeworth from behind in his jacket, and draw the view from the front, where he is moving forward uncovering the truth, and coming across various characters and incidents as he goes," Iwamoto says. "The positioning of each character was mostly based on how closely related they are to each other, but at the same time, we didn't want to have any spoilers because of that, so we did mix things up a bit too."

With release of the Investigations Collection, all previously released Ace Attorney games will be available for fans old and new to enjoy. We won't object, for sure. The only question we keep asking is whether Capcom will ever investigate fans' calls for a new mainline Ace Attorney game. ■

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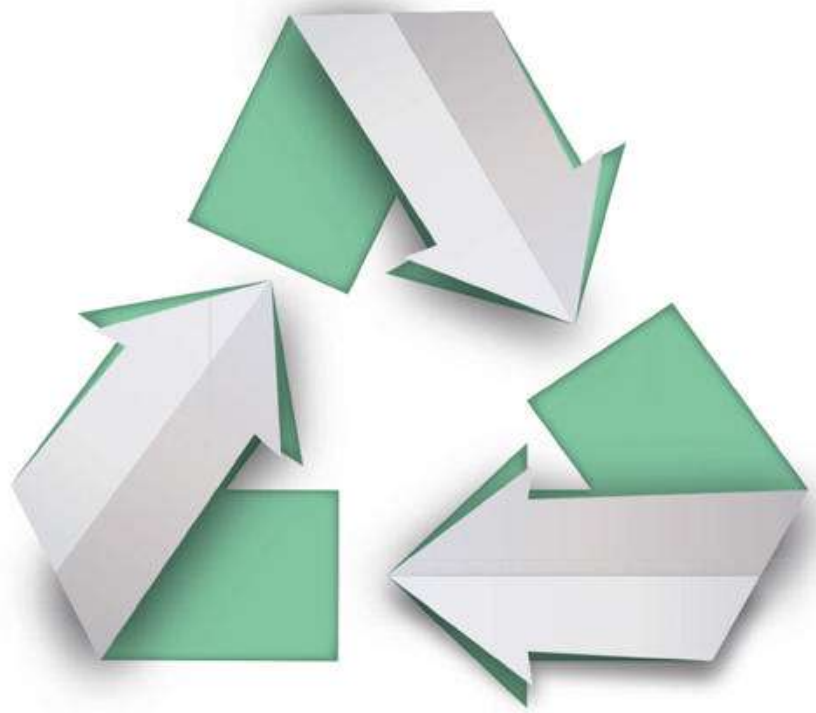

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Reviews

"LOSING YOURSELF WITHIN IT CAN FEEL GREAT."

076 Star Wars Outlaws

080 Visions Of Mana

A call to alms for JRPG fans

HIGHLIGHTS

STAR WARS OUTLAWS 076 | VISIONS OF MANA 080 | SAM & MAX: THE DEVIL'S PLAYHOUSE 082 | THE CASE OF THE GOLDEN IDOL: COMPLETE EDITION 083 | BLACK MYTH: WUKONG 084 | STEAMWORLD HEIST II 088
PEPPER GRINDER 090 | THE MORTUARY ASSISTANT 091 | CONCORD [ONLINE] 092

Star Wars Outlaws

All deathstick, no spice

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £69.99
ETA Out now
PUB Ubisoft
DEV Massive Entertainment
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 17-20 hrs (main story)
ACCESSIBILITY Huge number of options across 'gameplay', 'cognitive', 'colours', 'vision', and 'hearing' including toggles, holds, customisable visuals, controls, and more

Few worlds are as enticing to play in as Star Wars' Galaxy Far, Far Away. Yet, while there are plenty of appealing environments and creature designs in Massive's open world stab at the space, it falls down when it comes to figuring out what exactly it's asking you to do within it.

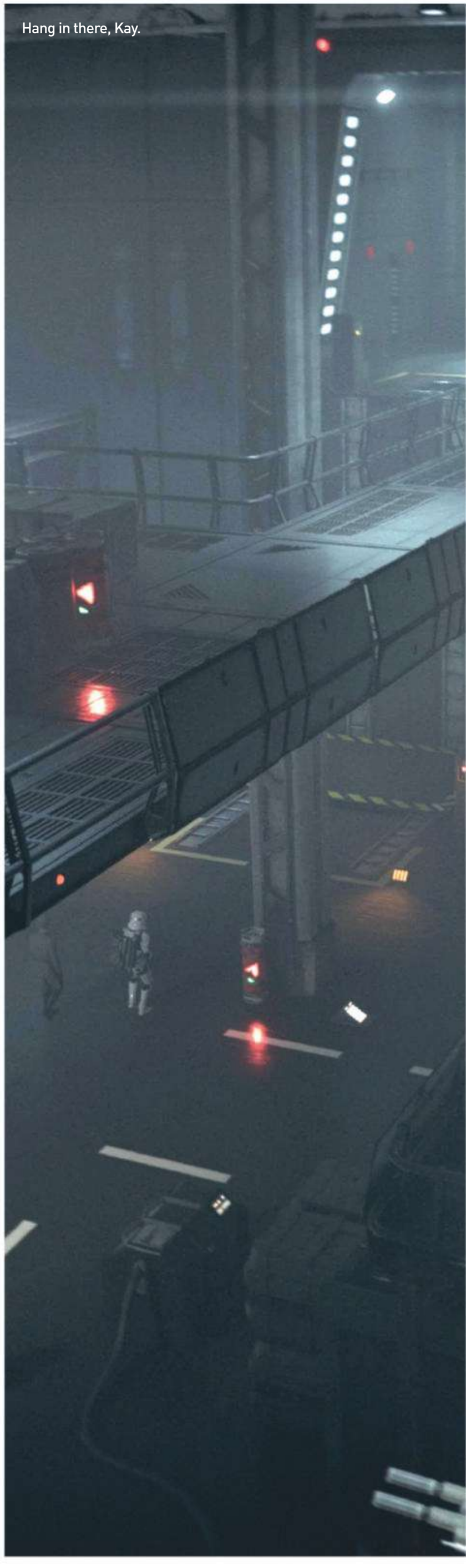
You play as amateur thief Kay Vess, accompanied by a little critter companion called Nix. Almost taking a page from fellow Ubisoft open world crimer Watch Dogs, Nix can interact with parts of the world on your behalf – stealing trinkets from marks, activating switches from a distance, and even attacking guards. It's just like Aiden Pierce's phone… if you had to wait a painfully long time for it to activate. Nix moves through the world in a manner appropriate for a four-legged creature – but this realism detracts from the fun of being able to manipulate the world around you.

It's emblematic of many issues that hang over Star Wars Outlaws, which constantly flirts with being a fantastic adventure but never quite comes through on its promises. Walking through one of the game's handful of settlements surrounded by wonderful recreations of Star Wars' many alien species is great, until you realise the simplistic, linear corridors make each settlement feel surface level. Having to assemble a crew seems like a great premise, but by the end you've not come to care for any of them. Constant bugs see Kay clip off ledges, enemy AI going wonky, and in one case the controller rumbling non-stop.

QUIET TIME

Being a thief means you need to stay quiet when possible. Unfortunately this also means the game opens with a slew of insta-fail stealth missions, working in some rough checkpointing to boot. This rarely lets up, though you'll eventually become accustomed to destroying alarms to buy yourself some leeway. Stealth is basic, but it's often hard to navigate staying unseen.

Bigger bases within the open world offer some freedom in your approach, which sometimes feeds


Hang in there, Kay.

Amateur thief Kay Vess is accompanied by a little critter companion called Nix.

1 Acres of clinically clean Empire-chic interiors are yours to crouch-walk through as you punch fascist Imperials and complete hacking minigames. 2 One level is an extended nod to Star Wars Episode II's worst scene. A brave choice, and not terribly executed. 3 Lengthy QTEs play out when you stumble upon a new regional dish for Nix to enjoy, with some of the best cutscene direction in the entire game to boot.

back into the story missions – do you go in the side vent, up and over, or crouch-walk behind a moving cargo lift? But too often the main missions plonk you into much more prescriptive spaces that play out more like linear tasks. You'd imagine infiltrating Jabba's Palace would be a highlight of a stealth-based Star Wars thieve-'em-up, but here it's one of the most rote corridor-trawling experiences we've played in quite some time. At other points third-person shooting encounters are shoehorned in, like one absurd sequence that forces us to quietly take out one group of guards to get past a laser gate, only for alert icons to immediately pop up over a dozen guards' heads once we creep past for a mandatory shootout.

FORCE LEAP

When she's not crouch-walking, Kay loves to scramble around shipwrecks or large ventilation systems (that are, at least, true to the source material) by jumping between yellow ledges and climbing handily-placed grates.

These are functional for the most part (a few bugs do see her tumble into bottomless pits), but rarely exciting. Kay is stiff to control, and the jumping sequences are incredibly basic. Never mind not matching Uncharted's inventive heights, they don't even match Ezio's jumping challenges from Assassin's Creed Brotherhood – from the same publisher. While we might not expect guttersnipe Kay to be quite as agile as Star Wars Jedi's force-sensitive Cal Kestis, we can't help but compare how much smoother Respawn's adventure is to play with any precision.

Too often the main missions plonk you into spaces that play out more like linear tasks.

OUCHER RIM

Oddly, some of this frustration can begin to melt away as you take your time to explore the planets on offer. There are four open areas in total, three of which are proper open worlds (the snowy Kijimi is a single city), and a sprinkling of explorable space stations and the like in between. Uncovering extra little caves and alleys to jump around for some treasure (upgrade materials, paint jobs, gear) can be fun, especially when you just stumble upon them. With that said, everything is so spread out that specifically hunting for treasure is hard – it's something better enjoyed on the way between missions.

Factions control certain spaces too, meaning the better the opinion these criminal syndicates have of you, the more unimpeded you'll be when exploring their territory. The story will push and pull these opinions no matter what, often leaving you to do boring repeatable missions to juice your rep for an easier time, though it's not a big deal. Gunning down a whole Hutt encampment will be easily forgiven if you do a few delivery jobs.

Kay's upgrades are inventively tied to Experts she can find and befriend. A gunslinging sheriff, for instance, will give her shooting challenges to complete that then improve her marksmanship. Most involve fun set-pieces that are genuinely worth doing – ever

4 Kessel Sabacc is fun. Each table offers unique rewards. **5** Alkiva has plenty of water – best explored with a speeder upgrade. **6** Don't worry, this sarlacc's dead, though its insides have attracted scavengers. One of the best missions.

wondered what the insides of a sarlacc look like?

These Experts don't join you, which makes it odd that it feels like their characters undergo more development than the crew you've been set out to assemble. Even standouts like trenchcoat-wearing battle droid ND-5 barely factor into the story. He mostly just stays on the ship, offering meagre radio chatter now and then (we even heard some repeats). If he's the best of the bunch, you can forget about growing close to any of the others. Even during their own recruitment missions, they're usually given something else to do while Kay clambers around. It's a genuine shame as the acting is great across the board – Outlaws simply doesn't give its cast much to work with. In comparison, Star Wars Jedi's crew get more development in the *first hour*.

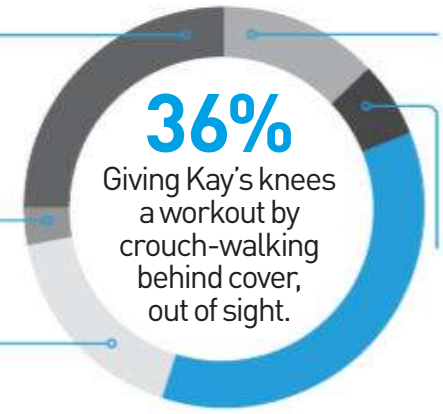
Star Wars Outlaws is the first proper open world Star Wars game, and the little things can add up to make losing yourself within it feel great, whether that's going a few rounds of Kessel Sabacc (a quicker version of the galaxy's favourite card game), cruising around Tatooine on your speeder bike or through space in your ship, or even just strolling around your local cantina. Unfortunately, there has to be more, and even setting aside the frequent bugs and muddy (no matter the setting) graphics, it's simply unable to live up to its lofty aspirations and inspirations. There are more satisfying stealth games, more thrilling action platformers, and even Star Wars games that feel more like Star Wars.

Good Star Wars vibes quickly begin to feel wasted between stiff platforming, clunky insta-fail stealth, and a crew we just don't learn to love. Oscar Taylor-Kent

5 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: STAR WARS OUTLAWS



25% Leaping between ledges, grates, and grapple points.

13% Firing from the hip in hectic shootouts.

3% Winning big in Kessel Sabacc.

6% Waiting for Nix to do as you've requested.

17% Zooming around on a speeder.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

VAIL TORMIN
A bounty hunter looking to cash in on Kay's death mark. Will she succeed?

LADY QI'RA
Returning from Solo, here she's head of the Crimson Dawn faction. Get on her good side.

QUINT CRESADDE
Former pirate turned small-town sheriff, her trigger finger is the fastest on Tatooine.

STATPACK

03
Gear pieces for Kay: jacket, belt, and 'pants', many with buffs and benefits. Plus two for Nix (not pants, obviously), and five charm slots.

54
Skills to unlock across nine Experts. Don't forget to collect transmissions in space (in yellow crates) to unlock that pesky middle one.

08
Firing modes for your blaster, with three equippable at once: a charge shot, one blaster for droids and shields, and another for meatbags.

HOW TO... WORK WITH FACTIONS

Brokers offer a range of jobs across on behalf of the four factions. Once met, they can be accessed from your ship. Complete these simple tasks to earn rewards and boost rep (including betraying them to earn favour with rivals). Good rep means better jobs, and access to secure areas.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

Better missions. Better crew. Better heist. Sly 3 remains the king of PlayStation crime capers.

Star Wars Jedi's open hubs work better than Outlaws' broader, emptier maps. And the Mantis' crew *owns*.

Nix is outclassed by Marcus' phone. Watch Dogs 2 constantly throws fab stealth challenges at you too.

At the beginning, Val and Hinna are still looking forward to their journey.

Visions Of Mana

The first Mana game in over a decade is a vision

Over the last 20 years, it's fair to say the Mana series has been struggling somewhat. The third mainline entry, Trials Of Mana, initially didn't make it to the West (we eventually got it nearly a quarter of a century after its Japanese debut); Dawn Of Mana for PlayStation 2 is best forgotten. But happily, we can say it now: Visions Of Mana, the all-new mainline series entry, finally gets the series back on track.

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £59.99
ETA Out now
PUB Square Enix
DEV Ouka Studios
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 40-50 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY N/A

You've probably heard this story before: in the world of Visions Of Mana, young people chosen by the elemental gods become so-called alms, tasked with travelling to the Mana Tree, where they have sacrifice their souls in order to ensure the continued flow of mana to the land. Hinna is chosen as the alm of fire and sets off with her childhood sweetheart Val as her protector, treating the presumably-final journey as great honour. Several other alms, such as Morley, the alm of the moon, and Palamena, the alm of water, join their party as they progress.

DEAD ON ARRIVAL

Visions Of Mana tells a pretty straightforward hero's journey – you travel to different villages, where you have to find your next teammate and then carry on to the next stop. Inevitably, Val and Hinna have doubts about Hinna's sacrifice, which leads to a great mid-game twist, but the story is kept simple overall. This plainness is greatly enjoyable because we're a bit tired of JRPGs that make us regularly peruse their glossaries to make sense of their story, and simplicity is something the Mana series has always been good at. Instead of wondering who, what, where, and why, you can focus on the stunningly beautiful locales or listen to your party banter.

Worldbuilding is also very good – you meet different races with different customs and their own histories as you travel – and from political intrigue to making a statue cry, the issues you solve on the way give the straightforward overarching story a lot of life. Visions Of Mana isn't only seriously beautiful, the locations are varied, each map stuffed with treasure chests and several additional combat trials. As we play, we can't wait to see what's next, from sunny beaches to deserts to snowy mountains and impressive cities. It's great fun to explore each map to the fullest, aside from towards the end when you start backtracking, when it very much feels like a game that could have been concluded but was artificially lengthened instead.

CLASSY FIGHTING

Visions Of Mana uses real-time combat. You will spot clusters of enemies out in the world, and battles begin as soon as they notice you or you attack. Many

Each map is varied and stuffed with treasure chests and several additional combat trials.

1 Each boss is huge and impressive to look at, if not fight. 2 This is a game you will want to take screenshots of all the time. 3 Elemental attacks like Careena's wind attack here can take out whole groups of enemies.

of the classic enemies of the series make a comeback, from rabites to tomato wizards to those ducks wearing helmets.

The real standout in combat is the elemental powers you acquire with each new alm. All party members can equip an elemental vessel – an item which unlocks a class for them, with completely new abilities and a different fighting style. Val, for example, goes from a quick one-handed sword fighting style to someone who swings large two-handers when equipped with particular elemental vessels. Others give him a lance. Elemental vessels even have their own skill trees, so you can unlock further powers and special attacks for each character. Each party member can also equip ability seeds that give you stat boosts or enable you to use magic.

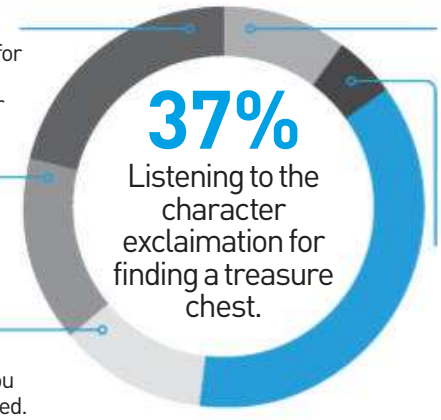
You can switch seamlessly between party members as you fight, to keep things interesting, but at least on normal difficulty, combat still feels a little too easy. It's speedy and satisfying, but if you keep mashing an attack button while your very helpful teammates do the rest, enemies rarely stand a chance. Conversely, that's good – the game's checkpointing takes you back to your last manual save, so losing a battle can erase a lot of progress. While this is annoying, knowing you'll find something new at every stop, both in terms of story and skills, and even collect team members until pretty late in the story, makes Visions Of Mana consistently fun to play.

The best game in the series in over two decades. Its downsides are minor, making it a wholeheartedly recommendable, classic JRPG experience. Malindy Hetfeld

9
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: VISIONS OF MANA



21% Listening to a cutscene, walking for ten seconds, then listening to another cutscene.

15% Switching classes not for the combat benefits, but the stylish costumes.

12% Getting distracted trying to reach a treasure you absolutely don't need.

10% Getting through a battle unscathed because you've delivered *that* many combos to foes.

5% Not realising you've already acquired an item to unlock more of the elemental skill tree.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES

EOREN
After losing his love, Eoren vows to get her back, and to end the circle of sacrifice.

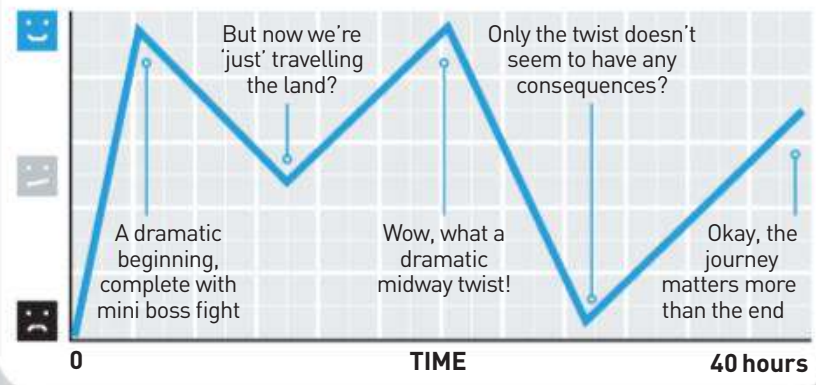
MORLEY
Blames himself for the destruction of his village. Becomes an alm to make up for it.

VUSCAV
Potentially a prince of legend(?) and the perfect replacement for a missing ship.

HOW TO... SWITCH CLASSES

To switch classes, equip an elemental vessel to a character in the gear and equipment menu. The first time you unlock a class, a transformation sequence will play. You need to equip each class at least once to unlock it, buy weapons for it, and use the elemental plot, (the skill tree).

COMPEL-O-GRAPH


But now we're 'just' travelling the land?
Only the twist doesn't seem to have any consequences?
A dramatic beginning, complete with mini boss fight
Wow, what a dramatic midway twist!
Okay, the journey matters more than the end
0
TIME
40 hours

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
Fly on Flammie – the series' four-legged, furry creature – for the first time.

SILVER
Find Lil' Cactus (who is, indeed, a little cactus) in all possible areas.

GOLD
Beat the game. Well, you have to get something for doing it, don't you?

Sam & Max have never looked better. This loving remaster polishes their badges to a shine.

Sam & Max: The Devil's Playhouse

The freelance police become toy boys

INFO

FORMAT PS4
PRICE £15.99 (£39.99 for the trilogy)
ETA Out now
PUB Skunkape Games
DEV Skunkape Games, Telltale Games
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 2-3 hrs per episode
ACCESSIBILITY Toggle hint frequency; customisable subtitles; flashing effects, and film grain toggles

Classic adventure games had half their screens taken up by verbs – use, pick up, talk to, and the like. When it was released for PC in '93, Sam & Max: Hit The Road (which is still unavailable elsewhere) did away with that, LucasArts simplifying actions into contextual presses with colourful menus. All these years later The Devil's Playhouse radically refreshes the dog and lagomorph duo… with more verbs!

Far from being an overcomplicating blast from the past, though, TDP's new verbs are smartly deployed. These are the type of actions you rarely get to play with in any game, let alone a puzzle-solver like this. They're even tied to the narrative: Max awakens to psychic powers that come from another dimension.

IDLE HANDS

The trigger-happy rabbity thing's brain primed, all he needs are the Toys Of Power to unlock fresh ways to interact with the world. A toy telephone enables him to travel to any phone number he has memorised. Viewfinder goggles, meanwhile, offer a glimpse into the near future. A ventriloquist's dummy projects his voice into people or objects.

These tools offer quality-of-life benefits as well as new ways to think about puzzles. The goggles can provide hints, for example (though are often humorously cut short). And with the phone, Max and whoever he's touching essentially gain fast travel – allowing Sam to follow along naturally. But, ah, if Max squabbles with a certain individual, perhaps you can then move them around as well. It's a thrill to have a new way to think about poking around the world Sam & Max inhabit beyond simple inventory juggling.

Sometimes, though, the toy focus can make solving puzzles too straightforward, flattening out the possibility space, though we're glad there's no chance of anything like Monkey Island's 'monkey wrench' logic.

Each of the five episodes dramatically changes the types of puzzles in play, so it's no one-toy pony. The powers on offer vary a lot, as do the forms and structures of the locations you visit. Areas are rarely repeated, and when they are, are substantially changed (you never even set foot in the pair's office). The strong second episode plays out by astral projecting through film reels of Sam & Max's equally zany ancestors, playing around with events out of order to make sense of the ending.

It all builds into a tense mystery that riffs on Lovecraftian mythos; fertile ground for the freelance police's often surreal and absurd humour (though some jokes do feel very 2010s). It's almost the best adventure game ever. We can't argue with the laughs.

A gorgeous remaster, the freelance police have never looked or played better. Psychic powers are a stroke of genius, though detract a tad from other aspects. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8 PLAY

The idol's responsible for a whole lot of mayhem, and it's up to you to unpick it.

The Case Of The Golden Idol: Complete Edition

Always believe in your soul

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £24.99 (£14.99 without DLC)
ETA Out now
PUB Playstack Limited
DEV Color Gray Games
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 10-12 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Hints

Playing as an unexplained omnipresent detective spirit, it's your job to unravel not only the mysteries of the titular golden idol, but the murder and mayhem that follows in its wake as conniving colonists, feuding family members, and conspiring cultists all vie to get their mitts on the strange artefact.

Each case has you viewing a frozen snippet of time, often immediately after a confounding murder has occurred, usually across a few screens. By clicking around you're able to peek within the scene, including digging through characters' inventories and hearing what they're saying at that moment.

You can collect keywords and assemble them across solution boards. Most boards are optional, such as ones that ask you to correctly name each person in the scene, but completing them will give you helpful hints for the primary solution board, which tasks you with filling out what exactly happened. Colour-coded keywords nudge you in the right direction, as does a prompt that alerts you if you have just two or fewer incorrect phrases. (There's also a separate hint system).

GOLDEN OLDIES

While deductions are fairly simple to begin with – for example, working out what a cadaver's fashion sense tells you about the what they were doing when they copped it – they quickly grow more complicated. You'll be poking around the personal items in servants' quarters to match up rooms with staff members, figuring out the results of gambling games, and even unravelling a cult's strange beliefs and practices.

What's great is how each case interacts with the others, recurring characters and even hints that aren't relevant to your current conundrum helping to inform the broader mystery at play. This all comes together in a final chapter that asks you to put all that together and even revisit previous areas.

Noticing these connections leads you to realise events are rarely what they seem, from discrepancies with character names to seemingly innocuous inventory items that link people unexpectedly, pushing you to make deductions that feel genuinely shocking at times.

Prequel DLC, included here, raises the difficulty, and perhaps gets overly complicated. Solution boards here can appear to have more blank spaces than connected words, which makes it easier to feel a bit lost. Unfortunately, some typos and missing words in this port, which features chunkier solution boards than the PC original, can seriously hamper your ability to progress. Hopefully this will be fixed, but at the time of writing (a few weeks after release) it's still present. Otherwise, these mysteries are brilliant.

Few detective games lead you to make as many brilliant deductions that feel like your own path to follow, though some issues with the port let it down. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8 PLAY

Black Myth: Wukong

Ace ape adventure or about to be chim-panned-zee?

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £54.99
ETA Out now
PUB Game Science
DEV Game Science
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 30 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Subtitles; colourblind mode; adjustable motion blur

So, a soulslike based on the classic Chinese novel Journey To The West? Whatever next? A soulslike based on Pinocchi…oh. Honestly, there are worse influences for an action-RPG than an epic tale of a monkey exploring beautiful lands and hitting everyone they meet with a big stick (we haven't read the book, so we're assuming this game is a 100% faithful adaptation).

Of course, we all know the *real* text that developer Game Science is drawing inspiration from is Dark Souls. Punishing combat, gargantuan boss battles, no map screen, enemies hidden tiresomely around corners… all present and correct and increasingly clichéd. Fortunately, Game Science has enough ideas for Wukong to *just about* stand out within gaming's most oversaturated genre.

MONKEY MAGIC

We shudder when we start the game, thinking we've got 50 hours ahead of us of battling monsters with a mere staff. But it's not long before we start unlocking spells, and they're mostly brilliant. The first freezes our enemy momentarily in time, allowing us to get some deliciously cheap hits in. We'd have given one of our favourite limbs to have had access to that in Elden Ring. Eventually we also get the power to temporarily create three clones of ourself, perfect for dealing with crowds of enemies or just bullying one poor lone wolf. Then there's 'Rock Solid', which is effectively a parry, as it turns the protagonist literally into stone, sending whatever sucker just hit him ricocheting away. All these powers are on cooldowns (even the parry, making this a far more dodge-focussed soulslike than most). Still, with so much delightful witchcraft at his fingertips, and more spells steadily unlocked, isn't our hero a little overpowered?

Sun Wukong is one of the most famous figures from Chinese literature.

> It's not long before we start unlocking spells, and they're mostly brilliant.

1 Though Black Myth isn't as bleak as FromSoftware's gloomy output, there are still plenty of nasty sights in store. 2 You'll meet a lot of animals, such as this less-than-happy giant rat. Gulp. 3 This headless musician constantly plays songs about your adventure. We absolutely adore him.

Perhaps. It's certainly a little easier than Souls – in fact, it's not a bad entry point for those who have bounced off FromSoftware's games – with even a limited mana pool never truly stopping us from taking out any low-level grunt we encounter. But there's still enough challenge here to keep things engaging, mostly in its boss fights. Wukong *loves* boss fights. Even the most tedious company offsite away day would balk at a game that contains over *90* bosses.

Not all of these fights are born equal but there are some good horrors in here, with a great eye for spectacle. Arachnophobes should avoid this like an Australia-themed animal park, as one giant spider battle culminates with a chase with thousands of the horrible crawlies right behind you. It's also the first soulslike we can recall in which an opponent tries to poison us with a vicious spray of bum-gas. Sometimes the fights cleverly weave in story beats, like a meek king who keeps getting his more powerful sons to fight for him, and just gets in the way when he tries to help. His son groaning 'It hurts, dad!' when his father accidentally throws a projectile in his boy's face instead of ours raises a smile, as well as providing a golden opportunity to get some free smacks in.

The first soulslike where an opponent tries to poison us with a vicious spray of bum-gas.

GOLDEN MONKEY

If we had to guess what the budget of this game was we'd probably assume China's entire GDP. That's probably why we're not allowed anywhere near the stock market, but the developer has clearly turned on the spending taps. You can see it in the gorgeous graphics that shine even in performance mode, and the cutscenes that end every chapter, which have a unique animation style each time. It might have been cheaper to just show a big pile of cash on fire.

Alas, money can't buy you happiness, as we'll be explaining to our landlord next time the rent is due, and a big budget can't hide some pretty severe design flaws. It's a game full of beautiful forests and mountains, but we never, ever, ever, *ever* want to see either of those locations again. They're far too samey on the eyes, making navigation a messy chore, especially because this game is crying out for a map screen. Dark Souls got away with being mapless because of its excellent level design. We know how to navigate Blighttown better than we do our own home town (yikes, what a depressing flex). We wouldn't even know where to begin mind-mapping Wukong's massive, repetitive mountain. Fatally, that makes us less keen to explore it, leaving many of its secrets and treasures unplundered, its optional bosses doomed to a lonely eternity in the snow. Let's hope they packed jumpers, eh?

KING WRONG

Actually, what's the point of exploring when Wukong's laziest design compromise is its determination to fence you in? It's the year 2024 and the studio making a PS5 game thinks it's acceptable to have *invisible walls*. We can almost see Wukong's score falling in real-time as we

4 Navigating the samey snowy mountain in Chapter 3 is a right chore. 5 Each chapter concludes with a new animated short film. Expensive! 6 We're sure this giant, pointy-nailed arm is perfectly friendly. Why not give it a hug?

trudge across a frozen lake for absolutely ages only to slam straight into an invisible wall. Hey, at least the long, boring walk back gives us plenty of time to think of nasty words to call it.

And when the walls aren't ruining your incentive to search every inch of it, they're making the game harder and more unfair to play. The boss that concludes the game's second chapter is constantly moving behind an invisible barrier for some of the cheapest free hits since... well, since we froze them in time (but it's fine when *we* do it). Luring your opponent into an area that the game will actually let you traverse freely is not a compelling combat challenge, it's a nasty reminder that invisible walls are like parachute pants and frosted-tip haircuts – relics of a more stupid time that belong firmly in the past.

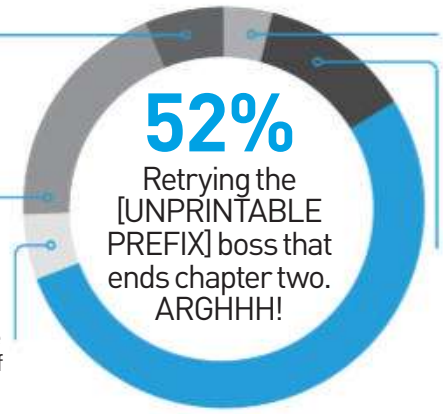
These problems aren't game-breakers (although the repeated attempts at that second chapter end boss owe us a new DualSense and window) and there's still plenty of fun to be had here. It's a colourful, charismatic adventure full of good boss battles and the occasional great one. But when the competition is this fierce, and Elden Ring: Shadow Of The Erdtree just raised the bar *yet again*, it makes it tough to recommend a soulslike that's flawed in ways others just aren't. Still, if you're willing to overlook some missteps so you can play as a time-stopping monkey who fights maliciously-farting monsters, there's a fun journey to be had here.

Time-freezing and self-cloning bring some power-fantasy to the soulslike structure, but invisible walls and overfamiliarity stop it reaching the big leagues. **Abbie Stone**

7 PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: BLACK MYTH: WUKONG



6% Making a cup of tea during the pretty/overlong cutscenes.

19% Groaning as you walk into yet *another* invisible wall.

5% Gasping at the sheer spectacle of it all. Phwoar!

4% Oooohing and ahhhhing at the pretty graphics. It's one of PS5's most beautiful games.

14% Wandering and accidentally backtracking through the samey levels.

HOW TO... UNLOCK SKILLS

Levelling up unlocks more skills on the skill tree, but keep an eye out for meditation spots. Each initial meditation will unlock another skill point in what has to be the speediest case of someone reaching enlightenment ever. They're definitely worth seeking out.

STATPACK

91
Bosses to take down. 91! We're sure we've played games with fewer regular foes. It's incredible this review wasn't finished in 2074...

10
Million copies sold in its first three *days* on sale, making this one of the fastest sellers of all time. Everyone loves the Monkey King.

06
Chapters the game is broken up into, each in a new location, though we'd appreciate a bit more variation. Just get us off that damn mountain!

LOVING/HATING

POWER TRIPITAKA
The gloriously OTT intro gives you a great taste of how powerful you'll eventually be. Truly a king among simians.

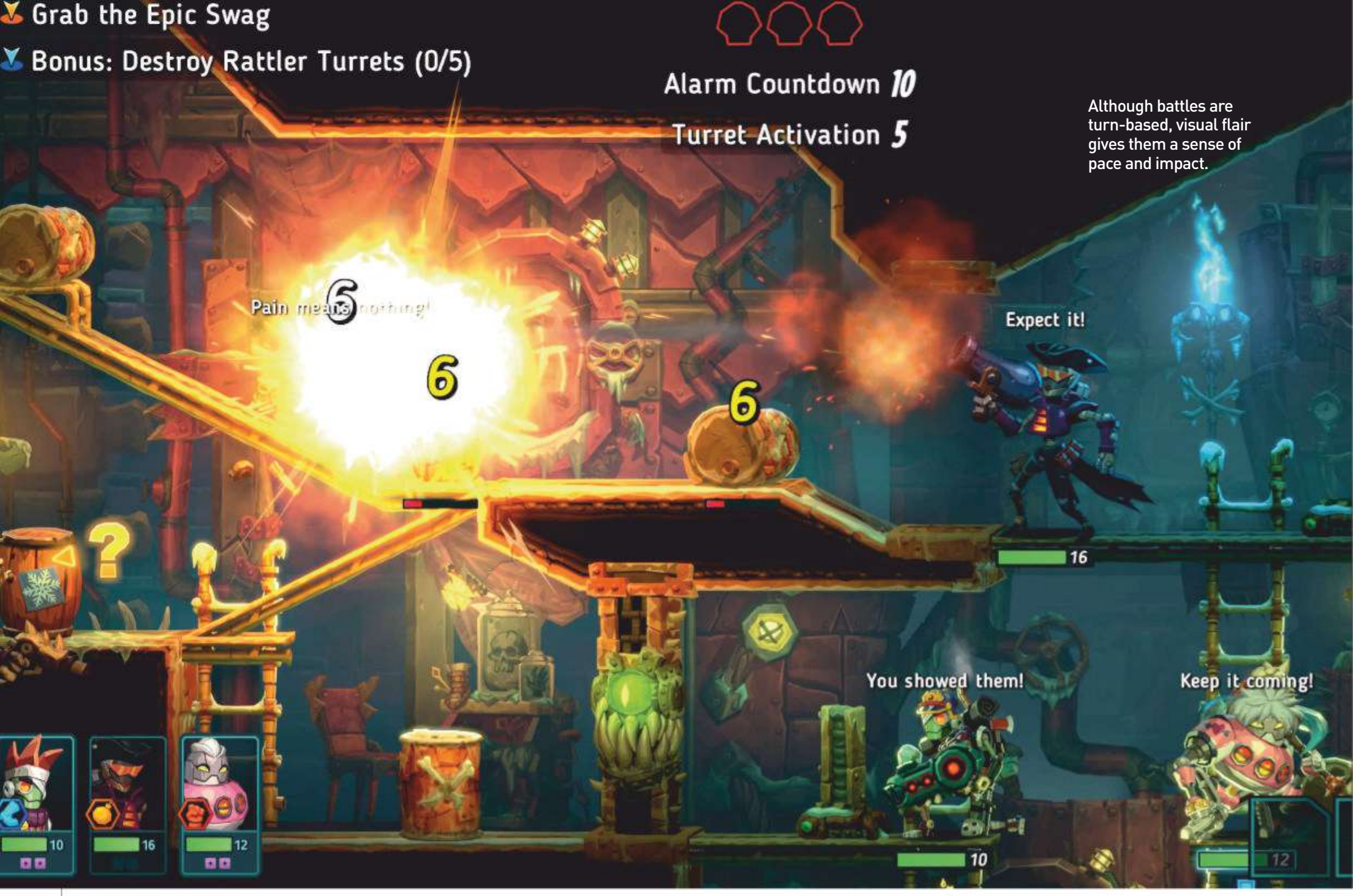
PILE OF MACAQUE
See that massive opening in this doorway? That easily Monkey-sized opening? Well, you can't walk through it.

IS IT BETTER THAN?

In Super Monkey Ball you're trapped in a sphere. That's hardly as fun as hitting things with a stick now, is it?

Surprisingly good movie tie-in to King Kong! Er, except for the bits where you're the monkey.

In Ancestors, the odd survival game from Assassin's Creed's creator, you try to evolve into humanity.



Although battles are turn-based, visual flair gives them a sense of pace and impact.

SteamWorld Heist II

There's no 'I' in steam (but there's one in 'heist')

Perhaps you tend to avoid games with turn-based combat. If so, you should consider giving this one a go, and not only because you can recruit a robot named Dame Judy Wrench. Although let's face it, that *is* a pretty good reason. While you need to play tactically here, the experience is designed to minimise confusion and maximise fun.

If this has caught your attention but you missed the first game, don't worry. Despite being set in a world of steam-powered robots, and referencing events and characters from the previous story, it's a mostly self-contained tale using the familiar idea of living in the shadow of a famous, successful parent. There are also *less* familiar ideas such as robots somehow replacing their parts with bones, but it'll all make sense. Probably.

Your journey to save this robotic world primarily consists of turn-based battles. These fights take place in small 2D arenas that look like they were designed for use in a platformer, complete with ladders to climb, loot pickups, and interconnected rooms. In fact, technically speaking, this is a turn-based platform shooter.

HEIST DARK MATERIALS

There's usually a little RNG involved in how much damage you deal, but there are no behind-the-scenes numbers when it comes to the chance of your weapon landing a hit in the first place. You aim your weapon manually during your turn, although ordinarily only the sniper rifles offer a visible aimline. If you miss your target, it's because you misjudged your angle. Or possibly your ricochet; there's an awful lot of ricocheting bullets in this game. That just adds to the fun; pinging a shot off a few walls to land a hit is satisfying, even – heck, *especially* – when you do it by accident.

There's plenty of info on screen at all times, without it ever becoming intrusive or patronising. Each weapon or item you can wield is accompanied by a concise explanation of the damage it does, any effects it has, and whether or not it will end your turn. If ending your character's turn on a certain square will trigger a negative effect, there's an exclamation mark to warn you. You can always see the health and armour of your crew, and of your enemies. If one enemy is buffing others, they are clearly identified, and so on. The net effect is that whenever you fail an encounter, you know it's because *you* did something wrong, not the game.

If you're scoffing that all this sounds like Baby's First Turn-Based Adventure, then scoff ye not. The difficulties, which you're free to bounce between throughout your journey, range from a light challenge to something that basically demands every single

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £24.99
ETA Out now
PUB Thunderful Publishing
DEV Thunderful Development
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 20-30 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Adjustable aim speed, vibration, camera pan speed, and brightness; press instead of hold; screen shake, minimap, cutscene subtitles, talking sounds, and reduced UI music volume on/off; scalable interface; custom controls

When you fail an encounter, you know that *you* did something wrong, not the game.

1 The travelling band perform songs recorded by the fantastically-named Steam Powered Giraffe. **2** Dame Judy, a full Boomer, but not in *that* way. **3** You use your sub to reach new locations, pick up loot, and fight enemy ships.

decision you make is perfect. You can even tweak individual elements for a custom difficulty if you prefer. Don't like the real-time combat while exploring the overworld, where your little sub automatically fires its weapons at anything within range? You can tone it right down.

KICKING BOT

Managing your crew and their gear is important, especially on higher difficulties. Getting hold of the best gear tends to mean risking staying in a mission after it's become dangerous to look for the best loot, or completing missions that you could otherwise skip entirely. It's no exaggeration to say that, depending on your chosen difficulty and your determination to eke out everything the game has to offer, one person's total playtime could be double another's (or more).

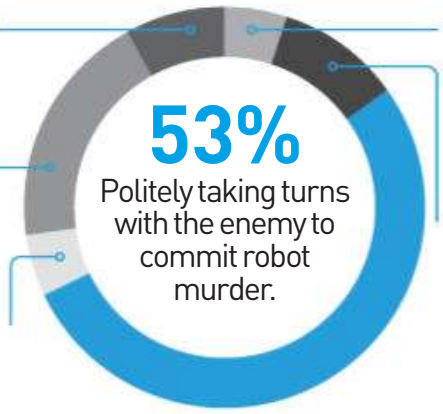
The story holding it all together isn't exactly a labyrinthine thriller for the ages, but it's pleasantly lighthearted stuff with some gentle humour that sometimes (though not always) prompts a chuckle. Importantly, this is a game that wants to work *with* you rather than *against* you. It's not your opponent. You're explicitly encouraged to make things as easy or hard as is right for you, and it's emphasised that abandoning a mission in order to try again costs you nothing. Kindness is sprinkled liberally across the story and systems alike, and we could all do with more of that.

Accessible enough for strangers to turn-based combat, unique enough for veterans. Designed to ensure you have fun, steam work makes the dream work. **Luke Kemp**

8
PLAY

THE PLAYBOOK

WHAT YOU DO IN: STEAMWORLD HEIST II



8% Sighing with relief as you finish a mission with just one bot left.

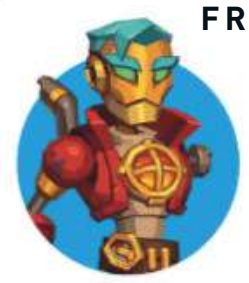
19% Adapting your tactics as enemies employ buffs or call new reinforcements.

5% Going 'ooh' as you nab a unique and powerful weapon.

5% Swapping in new weapons and gear. Ooh purple, that's a good one!

10% Piloting your sub, occasionally struggling to find the way forward.

FRIENDS & ENEMIES



QUINCY
Captain of the sub. Insecure, feeling crushed by the legacy of his famous mother.

DAISY
One of the first bots to join the crew, loyal to Quincy. Starts out as a sniper.

CHIMNEY
Kicks metal backside, as a Brawler by default, while sporting a fetching pink shade.

STATPACK

150
Guns – just over, in fact – are out there to find. Weapon types usually only vary by damage, but rarer models can carry useful quirks.

06
'Jobs', determined by the weapon a bot is given rather than being rigid classes. One, the Brawler, uses melee rather than a gun.

07
SteamWorld games so far: two Heists, two Digs, a Quest, and a Build. The first was Tower Defense on Nintendo DSi back in 2010.

HOW TO... USE COGS

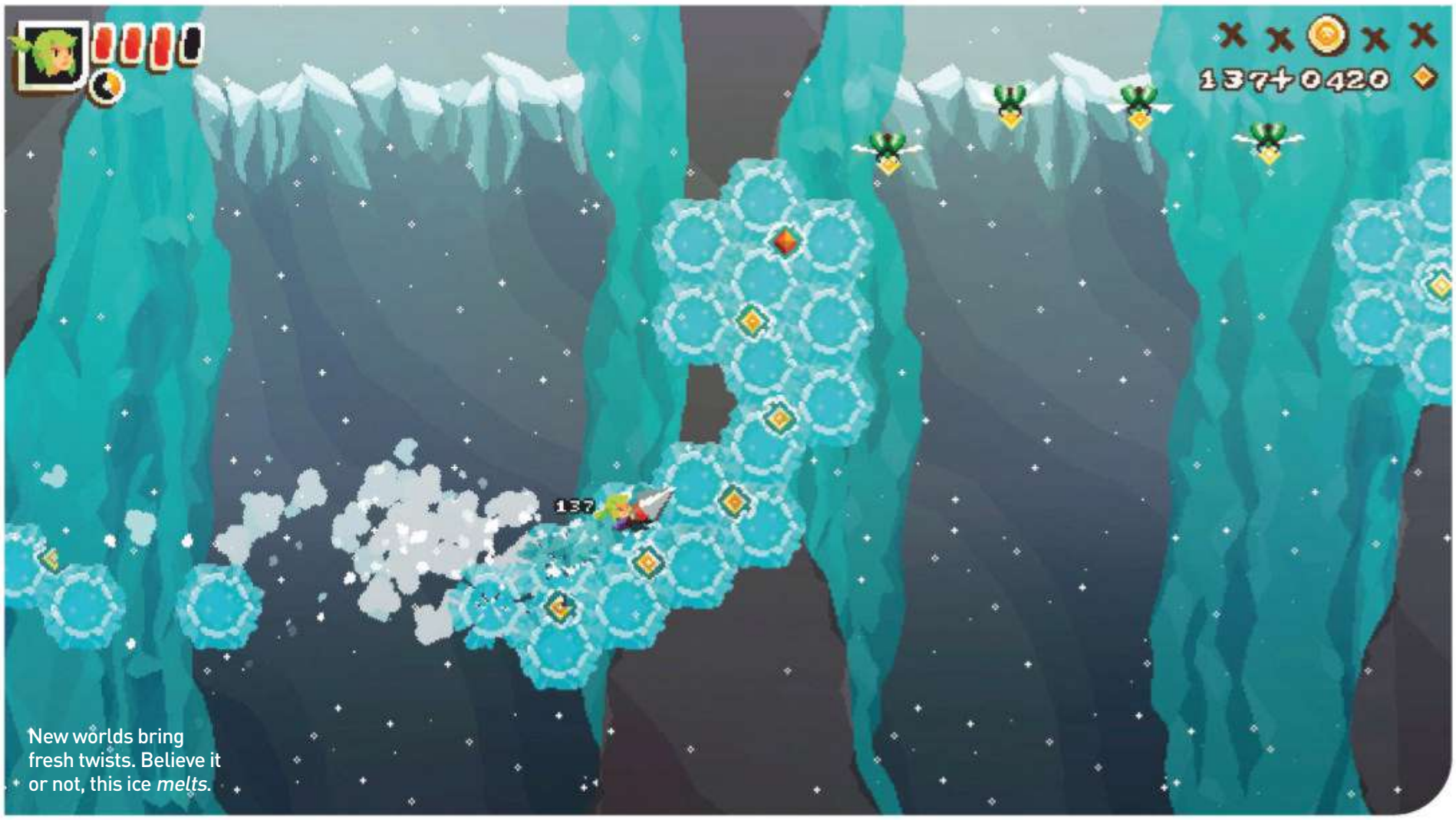
Cogs are the currency you spend to transfer perks from one job/class to another (as you progress, you'll be able to buy extras), but characters need to level up jobs individually. It's best to max out one job before changing in order to make the best perks available for purchase.

TROPHY CABINET

BRONZE
You'll get this when you equip an ability or perk from a different job for the first time.

SILVER
You can shoot off enemy hats for your collection. Get three with one shot for this.

GOLD
Complete the game within 35 in-game days. You need to aim for it from the start.



New worlds bring fresh twists. Believe it or not, this ice *melts*.

Pepper Grinder

Take this one for a spin

INFO

FORMAT PS5 (reviewed), PS4
PRICE £12.99
ETA Out now
PUB Devolver Digital
DEV Ahr Ech, MP2 Games
PLAYERS 1
LENGTH 2-3 hrs
ACCESSIBILITY Remappable controls; adjustable game speed; screen shake toggle; repeated inputs can be manual, hold, or auto

Every great platformer needs a unique hook, and in Pepper's case her grinder isn't just a grapple, but also a mechanical key, weapon, and – primarily – a massive drill for tearing through the soil. Pressing R2 plunges her into soft patches of ground and propels her elegantly through it, enabling her to crest and jump out like a land-based dolphin (though it does spin you beneath the waves as well, albeit at a slower clip).

Pepper is also propelled by a desire to reclaim what's hers, orc-like Narlings having absconded with her treasure after she was shipwrecked on a mysterious island. In classic platformer fashion, the game's split into worlds, each with a handful of fast-paced levels to blast through (and a bonus, secret level in each).

DRILL SPEED

Collectibles, from three pirate coins to heaps of gems to stuff in your pockets to spend on customisation options and stickers, are hidden throughout each level. While uncovering the coins in their often-devious locations is satisfying, your whirling speed as you tear through each level's many pockets of soil encourages you to go fast – naturally, the game has a time trial mode as well.

Like rings in Sonic, gems suggest paths to follow, but the analogue movement as you drill is completely freeform. Tap ⊗ and you'll gain a brief boost of speed, which can propel you an even larger distance when used immediately before emerging. This is vital for making some jumps, though you can also use it to skip across some areas as well.

There's a wonderful feeling of expression and sense of momentum to the movement. The constant drilling means you're always pushed forward without being able to stop, forcing you to make decisions under pressure about where to cut a path next. You can briefly mitigate this by turning in tight circles, but it still prevents you being able to sit still for too long. Accessibility features include a slow down, so the game's pacy nature isn't a barrier to anyone without the reflexes to keep up.

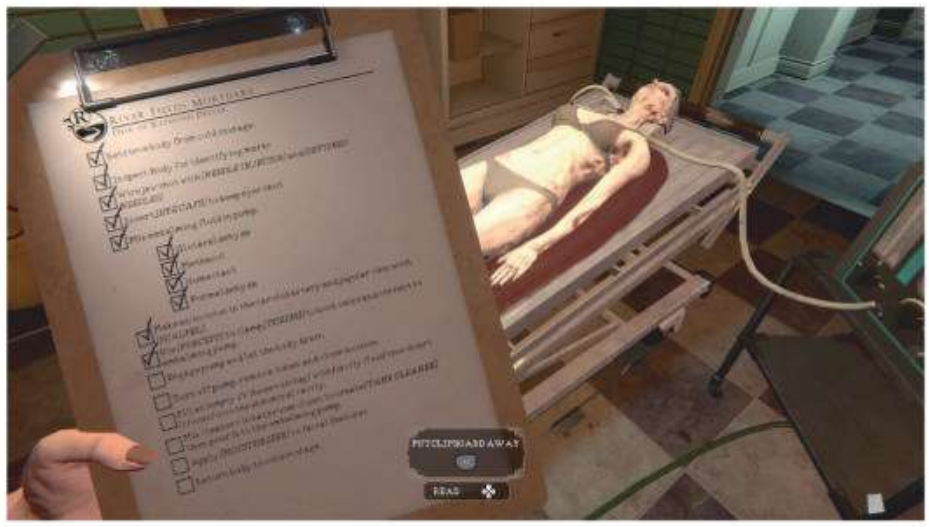
Constant variety keeps things from getting stale, many levels centring on their own gimmick – but it means you don't get to spend enough time with Pepper Grinder's strongest core mechanics. With only four worlds, the game's just a couple of hours long. For every great chain of drills and grapples across scary chasms, there's a less-inspired run-and-gun section, mech sequence, or wave of enemies to smash. Bosses, too, are more of a chore than a thrill to fight. It's good to be left wanting more, but when we're left feeling like we're just getting started we end up in more of a spin.

> **Your whirling speed as you tear through each level's many pockets of soil encourages you to go fast.**

With a unique and slick drill mechanic there's a lot to love, but not quite enough is made of it across a very brief runtime. Wanting more isn't always a bad thing. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

8 PLAY

INFO **FORMAT** PS5 (reviewed), PS4 **PRICE** £16.99 **ETA** Out now
PUB Epic Pictures Publishing **DEV** DarkStone Digital **LENGTH** 10+ hrs **PLAYERS** 1



The Mortuary Assistant

Do the dead comfort you?

Rebecca's turning her life around after a tragic past, but her new job at a mortuary becomes more demanding when the task of putting the dead to rest escalates to banishing demons – the place is haunted. A whole host of randomised haunting events brings tension to each shift as you wait to learn what terror awaits her that night.

Horror games with a simulation angle have seen something of a boom in recent years, and The Mortuary Assistant is a shining example of how well the genres blend together. As ghosts sneak around in your peripheral vision and you do your best to resist impending demonic possession, there's a certain amount of pressure to fulfilling the otherwise mundane routine of Rebecca's day job duties. Hauntings or no, things still need to be done in a particular way so the work gets done; it's a balancing act, something like a corpse-filled, demonic version of the way your cat keeps lying on your keyboard whenever you sit down to write.

Mystery swirls around your place of work, your boss, and all this exorcism malarkey, mixing in additional scares. It makes for a winning combination of both rewarding and punishing discoveries. Even once you've got all six game endings under your belt, new events to discover and the option to crank up the haunt aggression will keep you coming back.

HOLD THE MORT

New to this edition is 'endless embalming', which is simply a casual, if macabre, embalming simulator. This mode helps get you used to the steps so you're not constantly consulting your checklist, speeding up the process so you're not losing precious demon-hunting time. Of course, there's always the risk that you'll get too used to a certain rhythm only for supernatural entities to mess around with the electrics, dredge up horrors from Rebecca's past, or – worse still – hide the formaldehyde. Even when you're thrown for a loop like this, it's a great addition and surprisingly relaxing!

Unfortunately, this PlayStation port is a little unpolished. Controls meant for a mouse can be fiddly, and some unfortunate graphical glitches detract from the atmosphere, but these are minor apparations that are easy to overlook when the spirit itself is so strong.

Just as solid as when it first took horror streamers by storm, now with added content so you can play in the certainty you still haven't seen every scare. **Max Williams**

8 PLAY

THREE TO PLAY

PSN games you might have missed

Every month, loads of games come to the PS Store. You'd be hard-pressed to play them all, so we're looking at some that didn't quite make the cut. This month we're cleaving a path forward, taking a tumble into a magical world, and getting lost around the bend.

Grab your tankard and bellow, 'Skål!' for **Volgarr The Viking II**! Though Volgarr can take a hit, swinging your sword through more mythological monsters isn't all there is to this 2D action-platformer. Following on from a 2016 release, this sequel borrows heavily from vintage titles such as Rastan, as well as Ghosts 'n Goblins – following those arcade classics' lead on difficulty in particular. Still, you're able to decide just how much punishment you're in for by opting in or out of helpful features like save states and even an undead mode. Listen, we at Team PLAY love a rock-hard throwback challenge every now and again, but there's also a reason why we keep letting that particular cup of tea get cold.

Casting our eyes towards more recent sources of inspiration, our gaze next falls upon a solo dev project that borrows creative cues from acclaimed 2D RPG Undertale. Whimsical RPG **Mondealy** sees ordinary protagonist Michael literally stumble into a subterranean realm of humanoid animals – there's a bat, a deer, and even an axolotl. Soon catching the attention of the underground kingdom's royal family, there's courtly intrigue, mystery, and even romance. A more exploration-focussed experience clocking in at around six hours, it's definitely a lighter-weight title than some of its genre grandaddies but it's hard not to be charmed by its world.

Sticking with the theme of 'finding your way deeper underground,' and introducing an unsettling twist, we're closing out this column with **The Exit 8**. You're lost within the samey corridors of an underground train station – totally relatable, right? [*My advice: never try to change Tube lines at Bank* – ed] Except there's something *off* about these particular tiled walls. The only way to extricate yourself from this liminal space is to keep your eyes peeled and turn back whenever you spot something that strains at your sense of reality (like a fellow commuter making eye contact and smiling at you). While a brief, contained experience, you've yet to play a game of 'spot the difference' quite like this.

Concord

Cord blimey guv, it's a right lark

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PRICE £34.99
ETA Out now
PUB Sony
DEV Firewalk
OFFLINE REVIEW N/A
PLAYERS 10
CROSSPLAY PC (optional)

Let's make one thing clear right away: this is a thoroughly good time. It's fast and fun, with superb variety to its characters, weapons, and abilities. It's also a game with an identity crisis. There seems to be the detritus of an abandoned campaign mode at an advanced stage of development, unceremoniously killed in favour of live service, scattered around the game.

Note the high-production-value, albeit intensely uninspiring, cutscenes. The huge amount of unlockable text that nobody will read in the 'Galaxy Guide'. The way characters are introduced and referenced as though you already know who they are. Maybe it's not a lost campaign; perhaps it's just poor storytelling, as seen in the early years of Destiny. But either way it's a bit weird.

> You're encouraged to swap characters; something we initially resist, but learn to enjoy.

Then there's the Crew mechanic, whereby you're granted a new buff (which stacks with any previous ones) on your next respawn each time you select a character from a new class. It's an interesting idea, but wouldn't it make more sense for buffs to apply depending on the characters currently in use by the team at large? Isn't *that* your crew?

BYE, CREW WORLD

Still, this encourages you to swap characters regularly; something we initially resist, but learn not only to tolerate,

UP THE GUNNERS

It-Z is probably our favourite Freegunner. She's low on health but high on mobility, able to take down a much stronger opponent in the hands of a talented player. Even in our hands, sometimes.

With attacks that can blind and burn rival players, as well as the ability to fly through the air for short periods of time, Haymar is one of the most popular choices among players. Look up for her.

Daw can combine his deployable healing pads with his forcefield to create some breathing space for the team. A surprisingly effective burst rifle means he can help in a fight, too.

but to *enjoy*. It adds a little much-needed unique flavour to the experience to swap between fast and slow characters, triple- and single-jump characters, long-range and short-range attack characters, healers, and tanks. We generally start matches as It-Z in order to buff the tanky Emari's speed, who then in turn increases healing for everybody else with a lower health pool. It makes the overfamiliar kill- and capture-based modes easier to forgive.

Matches tend to be over fairly quickly (especially deathmatches), making this something incredibly easy to dip in and out of. There's a danger that this rapidity will make the overall experience feel disposable, but we reckon you'll find you're more willing to jump into this than similar games, when you know you might get four or five (fast-paced, unpredictable) matches into 20 minutes.

We love the fast pace, map design is great, and every one of the 16 characters has something to recommend them. Concord's main challenge will be to hold on to an audience that has been conditioned to expect a conveyor belt of goodies in its PvP games. There are plenty of cosmetics and player card customisations to unlock, but most are distinctly unimpressive, and their unlock conditions opaque. We know that more characters, maps, and cosmetics are on the way. We genuinely hope that they're delivered with the regularity and quality that a new entry in the crowded live service space demands.

A lot of fun (and weird storytelling choices) at a reasonable price, with no sweaty jungle of microtransactions, Concord has respect for both your time and your wallet. **Luke Kemp**

7
PLAY

ExtendedPLAY

From updates to favourites – the games we just can't quit

Some skins can trigger fancy death animations for the final kill... for a price, naturally.

Valorant

A great hero shooter with some villainous pricing

We'll say it straight away: this is one of the best PvP experiences available on PS5 right now. A 5v5 attack and defence bomb-planting setup, with no respawning, is built upon with carefully designed maps and a great range of character abilities. Both best and worst of all, Valorant is free to play.

Before we get onto the monetisation, it's important to stress that this really is *so much darn fun* to play. The lack of respawns is just one reason why you'll find yourself carefully sneaking around corners and keeping your back to walls. Some 'Agent' abilities (which, like weapons, you have to purchase with limited funds between rounds) can reveal your position, temporarily blind you or limit your vision, or even leave you completely helpless for a few seconds.

What truly defines the experience, however, isn't the gear, the abilities, or the weapons. It's the sound design. We quickly learn that paying attention to what we can *hear* is just as important as – and often, in fact, more important than – what we can see. Moving at anything quicker than a tense crawling pace generates booming footsteps that can be heard by anybody within a fairly wide range.

INFO

FORMAT PS5
PUB Riot Games
DEV Riot Games
YEAR 2024

SOUNDS GOOD

Unsilenced weapons give away your position more easily than silenced ones, but there are more subtleties than that. Distinctive sound effects can betray what enemies are doing, and where they are. One map has doors

> If you want access to everybody straight away, that's going to cost you almost £140 of VP.

that can teleport you great distances, but generate a loud sound when used. Pickups that take you one step closer to your Ultimate generate a noise and take a few seconds to interact with. Most abilities have a unique sound associated with their use. Even picking up and reloading weapons can be heard over short distances. It gives the experience fantastic depth, but it does mean that hearing-impaired players are at a severe disadvantage. There's no accessibility setting to even the playing field.

Riot Games needs and deserves to turn a profit from this, but a lot of the pricing is difficult to justify. You can *very slowly* unlock all the Agents in the game for free eventually, but if you want access to everybody straight away, that's going to cost you almost £140 of VP. Battle passes are £8 a pop, with no way of earning back the VP you spend on them. Individual weapon skin prices range from 'oof' to 'are you serious?!!?', with the most expensive we've seen so far going for about £45 of VP. Ouch. It's well worth your time, but not much of what's available to buy is worth your money. **Luke Kemp**

Packed with possibility and less than a tenner – has Hell frozen over?

Doom + Doom II

Don't let the understated title fool you

INFO **FORMAT** PS5, PS4 **PUB** Bethesda **DEV** Nightdive Studios, Id Software, MachineGames, John Romero, TeamTNT, Dario and Milo Casali, the community **YEAR** 1993-2024

You'd be forgiven for assuming this is simply another basic rerelease of Id Software's genre-defining demon-blasting FPS games. But it's much more, and a must-buy.

For starters, this remaster comes courtesy of Nightdive Studios, which is almost unparalleled when it comes to quality remasters. With a bevy of accessibility modes, optional motion control aiming, graphical toggles, and soundtracks to choose from, this pack feels premium. Not to mention the slick, rapid blasting is incredibly smooth.

But this is also more than a simple duology, despite the name. As well as containing all episodes from the first two titles, it gives you Master Levels For Doom II, both Final Doom campaigns, No Rest For The Living, and Sigil. All full releases, these run the gamut from spotlights on top-tier community-made levels from the '90s to John Romero's own revisitation in 2019, an "unofficial fifth episode" for the first Doom. And Legacy Of Rust is a new release co-developed by Nightdive Studios, Id Software, and MachineGames.

Somehow, that's just the start. Mod support is a rare treat in any console release, and is present here. Browsing and managing mods could use some work, but this gives you access to an essentially limitless supply of fan-created levels, from comical sprite swaps (Lego Doom) to total conversions like the fantasy-styled REKKR and the wonderfully crafted Harmony, which uses scanned physical models for its enemies. The full list is a Wild West, as not everything will boot, but the chance to play legendary mods Thatcher's Techbase and MyHouse could come soon.

> The chance to play legendary mods Thatcher's Techbase and MyHouse could come soon.

In essence, Doom is perfect. This collection is the modern rerelease the classic series deserves. Withstanding the test of time, Doom is better than ever, and a gateway to so much more. **Oscar Taylor-Kent**

SPRING CLEAN

The Hall Of Fame's had a tidy! PS4 games with later new-gen ports have returned to the PS4 Hall Of Fame! We also bid farewell to the original PSVR, which now frolics on the PS farm.

PS5 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE NEW GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

Baldur's Gate 3

Based on fifth edition Dungeons & Dragons, developer Larian has apparently bottled the essence of only our most electric tabletop sessions to serve up an incredible RPG return. Offering a wealth of options for crafting your own adventurer – and 'yes, and-ing' your choices all the way – the story of how you become the titular city's saviour (or tyrant) feels distinctly your own at every turn.

02

Resident Evil 4

Losing sight of neither its legacy nor Leon S Kennedy's characteristic wit, this ground-up remake of one of the best survival horror shooters of all time boasts sharply honed combat, gloriously gory visuals, and even allows Ashley just a touch more independence.

03

Deathloop

Everything we love about Arkane's detailed, dense, and destructive gameplay in a game you'll keep coming back to. Unavoidably, as hero Colt's trapped in a time loop until he can pull off eight kills in a day, while being hunted by Julianna (who can be controlled by another player).

04

Ratchet & Clank: Rift Apart

A delightful return for the lombax/robot duo, using PS5's power to allow seamless portal hopping and stunning vistas and DualSense to give the comically large arsenal real oomph. A real showpiece that feels marvellous in the hands, and makes the case for PS5 exclusives.

05

God Of War Ragnarök

Mastercrafted to the point that would make Brok and Sindri blush, this apocalyptic father-son adventure pushes Kratos and Atreus to their limits. Building on the last game, everything from combat to level design is snappier, and it's a gorgeous end to the world.

06

Dragon's Dogma 2

Toss saurians over your shoulder to lob them off cliffs, clutch onto griffins for dear life as they soar away, or simply combo chimera into oblivion. From fights with big beasties to how you solve quests, this RPG epic bends to how you play while offering a challenge worth rising to.

07

Alan Wake 2

Remedy lets its freak flag fly in this twisting tale of two protagonists. As both FBI profiler Saga Anderson and author Alan you crisscross realities, blasting Taken and chasing pages. Layered, even a touch experimental, you've not heard one quite like this before.

08

Demon's Souls

Not many games allow you to feel the thrum of a gigantic heart in the controller. From sword slashes against nightmarish creatures to feeling magic fill your hands, this stunning recreation of the PS3 classic is a tour of just what makes PS5 so great.

09

Marvel's Spider-Man 2

Two heroes prove to be better than one in this smart sequel. The incredibly lush NYC is bigger, and slicker to web-swing and web-glide around, and missions have you brawling and sneaking through some superbly designed and unique areas. Spidey senses tingled.

10

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth

PS1 overworld traipsing is reimagined here with ridiculous depth, making for one massive globetrotting RPG epic. Combat levels up from the first game, mixing together real-time hack-and-slash with slower commands for high-octane strategising.

11

Dead Space

This remake is a reminder that the USG Ishimura is one of the best science-fiction haunted houses in the biz. Modernising touches not only give Isaac Clarke a voice but also keep long-time fans guessing by reinventing familiar necromorph encounters.

12

Hitman 3

On PS5, Agent 47's latest hit list looks beautiful – oh boy, those reflections! The good news is not only can you play the latest missions on PS5, you can replay all missions from Hitman and Hitman 2 inside IO's new PS5-developed engine. That's *a lot* of content.

13

Tekken 8

Boasting a roster of returning favourites alongside new faces, and introducing mechanics that make every bout snappier, this fighter hits hard and fast. Looking better than ever only on current-gen hardware, busting out your Wind God Fist has never before felt so satisfying.

14

Humanity

Channelling the bizarre spirit of PS1 puzzlers, this surreal quest to guide a populace through blocky mazes leans on modern tech to deliver sheer scope and spectacle. It helps that you, as a little shiba inu, must lead the way, becoming humanity's saviour.

15

Pentiment

Ever looked at a tapestry and thought: what if I could play that? And investigate a murder over the course of many years? Thankfully, there's no need to worry about being booted from the museum, as this excellent choice-driven narrative is playable at home.

16

Street Fighter 6

The streets come to PS5 in spectacular fashion. With a mix of fan-favourite fighters and excellent newcomers, the fighting is easier to get into than ever, yet just as deep. An in-depth story mode is more middleweight, but still vibrant and fun. An excellent round.

17

Helldivers 2

It's time to liberate the galaxy and spread democracy far and wide in the name of Super Earth. This tongue-in-cheek bug and 'bot shooter always brings you back for another round of co-op chaos. Just mind the friendly fire when you pepper the planet with orbital strikes.

18

Monster Hunter Rise

Though its maps may be smaller than those of Monster Hunter: World, everything else is souped-up, whether that's inventive new animal allies, your weapon combos, the vibrant feudal Japan styling, or the rampaging monster hordes. Go big... and save your home!

19

Gran Turismo 7

Like taking a bath in luxury motor oil while Yamauchi and the rest of Polyphony Digital relax you with cosy car history. The good vibes are matched by fantastic visual fidelity, and car handling enhanced by the DualSense controller for unparalleled driving feedback.

20 NEW

Kunitsu-Gami: Path Of The Goddess

Not another game combining hack and slash, tower defence, and traditional Japanese dance! Each unique step in this boogie stands out, from its beautifully gruesome demons to its tense boss clashes. A smidge easy until, ah, the terror of New Game+. And, step!

21

Solar Ash

Playing like a cross between Jet Set Radio and Sonic, gliding through the Ultravoid feels buttery-smooth. The subtle rumble of the DualSense offers an immersive layer to both movement and the action of pinning down an enemy. This is well worth losing yourself in.

22

Neon White

Fusing Doom-like blasting, speedy platforming, and card-based puzzling together in one heady, lightning-fast mix, Neon White is a jolt to the system like little else. Pure, electric gaming bliss that'll have you playing again and again to shave seconds off your best times.

23 NEW

Thank Goodness You're Here!

Like if Viz and Monty Python had a reyt good babby. From the chippy to Big Ron's Big Pies, everyone needs a helping hand. Literally, as you cheekily slap the town silly. Even comedy legends lend their voices. Only a couple of hours long, it makes for a chortling evening.

24

Prince Of Persia: The Lost Crown

In a hop, skip, and a time-warping jump, this once-beloved series has parkoured its way back into our hearts with a new protagonist, Sargon. Movement and combat both possess layers that are a joy to peel back throughout this metroidvania return-to-form.

25

EA Sports FC 24

FIFA's replacement represents a total overhaul. Men and women are mixed together in FUT to create limitless Three Lions/Lionesses combos. Individual PlayStyles transform gameplay, while presentation is as good as we've ever seen. Golazzo.

PLAY ON

Know what you like and looking for more? Here are alternatives to enjoy on your PS5

One thing we take seriously at PLAY Towers is crude, lewd, and downright silly humour. We loved **Thank Goodness You're Here!** for offering chortles worthy of the British comedy greats. Looking for other games to make you crack a smile? Well, we have some recommendations...

PICK #1

Return To Monkey Island

Wear your finest leather jacket

While this one isn't absurd in quite the same way as the weird British comedy TGYH draws from, it's hard to make an adventure game that isn't a little quirky. And especially not when it's Monkey Island. The latest entry is no different, asking you to make leaps of logic that seem out of left field at first until you click with its consistent way of thinking. With puzzles aplenty, Monkey Island is a different beast to the simpler TGYH, but elicits just as many chuckles, and has an equally striking comic-like art style.

PICK #2

Katamari Damacy Reroll

Small town, big problems

Residents all around Japan, and, indeed, the wider Earth all share one problem: they've yet to be rolled up into a giant ball! The Prince Of All Cosmos is here to help out, on orders from his father. You begin by rolling up tiny knick-knacks, but the size of what can become part of the spherical katamari increases as it does, meaning you'll be rolling all over town in no time, absorbing people, animals, cars, and bigger objects in no time. Quirky, colourful, and a joy to play – everyone needs to try Katamari.

PICK #3

Untitled Goose Game

So much for helping

Rather than being a blessing to the residents of this town, here you're the opposite: a very naughty goose. Hijinks ensue as you cause havoc for the citizens, filling in a checklist of crimes as you poke, prod, and snap at the world, sometimes unfurling your wings to be loud and proud, and at others sneaking with your head down before letting out a startling 'honk'! The residents may be more realistic here, but the slapstick is still cartoonish, making smashing up the place with abandon disturbingly satisfying.

Two can play that game – Untitled Goose Game's devs added co-op post-launch.

PS4 Hall of fame

THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO THE LAST GEN'S GREATEST GAMES

01

ALSO ON PS5

Uncharted 4: A Thief's End

Nathan Drake's swan song remains Naughty Dog's crowning achievement. Incredible action, massive levels, cheeky banter, and an all-important grappling hook combine with new characters and a 'too old for this *blorp!*' story that really works. Packing gorgeous detail, it's only improved by its PS5 Legacy Of Thieves update that boosts the framerate, adds haptics, and comes bundled with The Lost Legacy.

02

Red Dead Redemption 2

There are a lot of open-world games, but none that make you feel like you're a part of a world in quite the same way as Arthur Morgan's wild west adventure. Tremendously physical, an epic story, and some of the most satisfying headshots you'll ever find.

03

ALSO ON PS5

Grand Theft Auto V

Laughing in the face of other cross-gen ports, GTA V is eternal. Tight mechanics and multiple playable characters make this the best GTA to date. Updates have brought new music, more dynamic weather, and a game-changing FPS mode across both PS4 and PS5.

04

God Of War

A departure in some ways but a resounding return in others, Kratos is back with a son *and* a ruddy big axe. Taking the legend from Greek to Norse mythology, this entry brings a lot to the table while improving on what was core to the earlier series' identity.

05

ALSO ON PS5

The Last Of Us Part II

With near-photoreal visuals, emotional twists that land, and enough new ideas to ensure you're always thinking, this is a slick followup. Brutal, wince-worthy action flows like a river of blood as you weave in and out of stealth, though we do prefer the original's focussed tale.

06

ALSO ON PS5

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt – Complete

The White Wolf's epic journey is still an RPG like no other, sending Geralt on a huge journey across a vast open world filled with deadly monsters and some of the best-written quests you'll ever play. The excellent DLC is also included, making a truly epic ballad indeed.

07

Horizon Zero Dawn

A staggeringly large world that condenses cracking combat, accessible systems, and uncut eye candy into an action RPG that will please anyone. In Aloy, PlayStation might just have a new icon. Come for the robo-fights, stay for the exquisitely dense mythology.

08

ALSO ON PS5

Marvel's Spider-Man

Borrowing heavily from Rocksteady's acclaimed Batman series, this delivers the heart and soul of Marvel's superhero. It ticks every box you could ask for: perfect web-swinging, a powerful story, a roster of classic villains, and all of New York City to defend.

09

ALSO ON PS5

Persona 5 Royal

The most stylish JRPG ever made finds its definitive form in expanded release Royal. It combines dark and moving teen angst with unforgettable friendships that power you up in the heart-invading dungeons, and sets the gold standard for the genre.

10

Sekiro: Shadows Die Twice

FromSoftware's latest adventure repackages its unflinchingly difficult combat into a fantastical take on feudal Japan. More accessible than Bloodborne but layered with equally clever and subtle ideas, this is director Hidetaka Miyazaki's best yet.

11

Bloodborne

With the finest third-person melee combat in gaming, droolworthy art design, and the most twisted monsters imaginable, this is a gorgeously gothic must-have. The Old Hunters expansion adds enough nightmare fuel to make a return to Yharnam essential.

12

Yakuza 0

Set in Japan in the '80s, this is the perfect entry point to the long-running series. Bouncing between two heroes, you take part in a crime thriller by bashing enemies into dropping piles of cash, and undertake side-quests that include stealthily buying pornography.

13

ALSO ON PS5

Control Ultimate Edition

Jesse Faden's mind-bending, environment-destroying, object-chucking adventure is a blast. Wielding psychic powers and a transforming gun, this is Remedy at its most playful. PS5 benefits from ray tracing and a higher framerate – though you must choose between them.

14

Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

Solving your own murder seems hard enough, but you quickly find it's a single domino in a whole conspiracy run. Fortunately, as a ghost, that's where you shine, controlling objects poltergeist-style to untangle puzzle-box murders moments before others cop it.

15

Dishonored 2

The followup to a PS3 great, this game mixes a creative skillset with impressive level design to create a Kaldwin-ning immersive sim. From the shifting rooms of The Clockwork Mansion to learning to link your powers, there's so much scope for experimenting.

PSVR2 Hall of fame

THE VIRTUAL REALITY HITS YOU HAVE TO PLAY

01

Umurangi Generation VR

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Well, this modern classic sees that aphorism and raises it with righteous, rebellious rage. Ostensibly an immersive photography game, you have a range of lenses, camera settings, and filters to play with but there's a far bigger picture to be seen. Not only a master class in environmental storytelling, this is also testament to art as a powerful act of resistance.

02

Synapse

This roguelite shooter offers satisfying, stylish action in a monochrome world punctuated by colourful violence. It puts power in the palm of your hand – and your eyes. Going one step beyond point and shoot, PSVR2's eye-tracking tech allows you to glance and grab.

03

Horizon: Call Of The Mountain

Manages to make level after level of climbing compelling with different environments to pull yourself up through, the Sense controllers allowing for neat player expression. Just make sure you take a break, or all that spider monkeying will make your arms throb.

04

Star Wars: Tales From The Galaxy's Edge

Who shot first? *You*. Tactile controls make being a droid techie-turned-scoundrel a blast(er), from pulling gear off your body to using tools to meddle with machines. A bonus mode allows for lightsaber waggling too.

05

Rez Infinite

When you thought Testuya Mizuguchi's synaesthesia shooter was done, it moves to a new beat. Laden with sharp particle effects, twitchy controls make this unmissable, with eye-tracking aiming a revelation for this experiential shoot-'em-up.

06

Tetris Effect: Connected

While also on PS5, Mizuguchi's trippy, transcendent take on the block-based puzzler is nothing short of a masterpiece in PSVR2, placing you within a world of tumbling tiles like never before, enhanced from the base version with more collaborative elements.

07

No Man's Sky

The frontier is far from final, this free refresh for the latest headset propelling you to the stars. All the prior updates are here, and you've an unmatched level of fidelity to reach out and touch the bizarre randomly rolled planets you uncover (and to fiddle with your ship).

08

Moss: Book II

Both rodent puzzle platformers benefit from PSVR2 enhancements, but the star performer of the pair is this sequel that's every bit the mouse's whiskers. As charming as ever, expanded combat options mean you feel even more connected to your li'l hero, Quill.

09

Gran Turismo 7

Ever driven a car? Then you'll know what to expect. GT7's already incredible simulation races gain a new level of immersion simply from checking your GPS and mirrors and seeing the courses whizz by. It's only a new view mode, yet it's enough to be a must-try.

10

Before Your Eyes

Blink and you will indeed miss it. Put down the Sense controllers, as here you interact using eye tracking, piecing together your life scene by scene, progressing whenever your peepers close (generously, the mechanic can be turned off if you want to see everything).

11

Little Cities: Bigger!

Waving your hands like a conductor, you paint with land and accent with buildings. This is a town-builder toybox, with management mechanics sanded down to an accessible degree, and lots of delightful details like your city's denizens looking up to wave at you.

12

Stilt

This one's at its best when you throw your arms wide and embrace the silliness. Straightforward platforming is reinvented in VR, and allows the simple joy of hurling yourself around to shine – to say nothing of the fact that upgrades enable you to strap cannons to your feet.

13

Song In The Smoke Rekindled

The devs have taken great pains to ensure this stripped-back survival game remains immersive at all times, placing much of what you need to do, from skinning pelts to pinging arrows, directly in your hands. Be careful to keep the dark at bay at night, too.

14

The Last Clockwinder

This spatial puzzler is all about putting things in the right place, whether that's flinging objects around or putting yourself to work. Thanks to the ability to summon clones, you're quite the helping hand (now if only we could do that at PLAY Towers).

15

The Last Worker

Work hard, revolt harder. As a token final human working alongside machines in a send-up of big online retailers, you need to balance the oddly compelling mundanity of sorting and organising packages with sneaking around vents to bring down big business.

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HIGHLIGHTS

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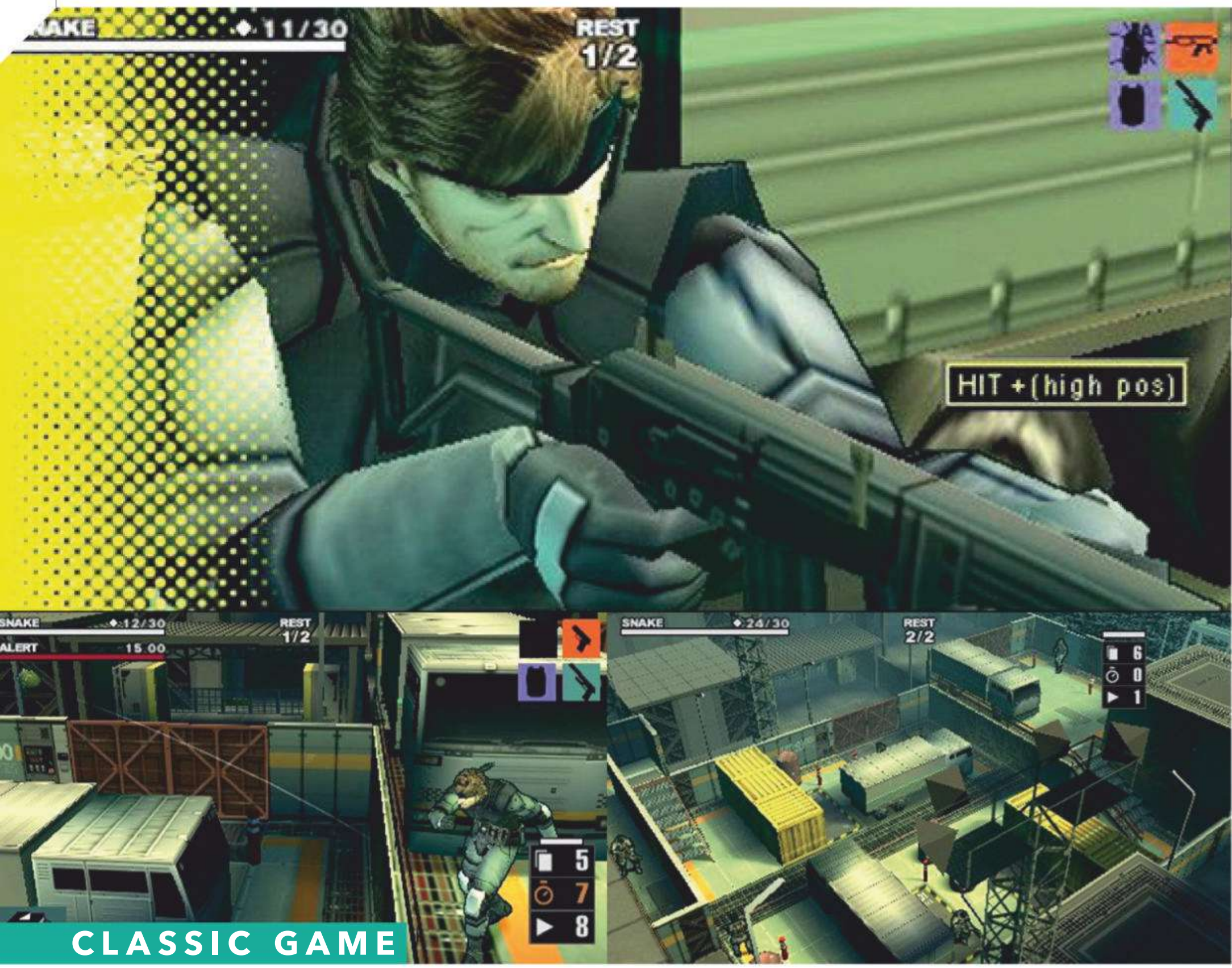
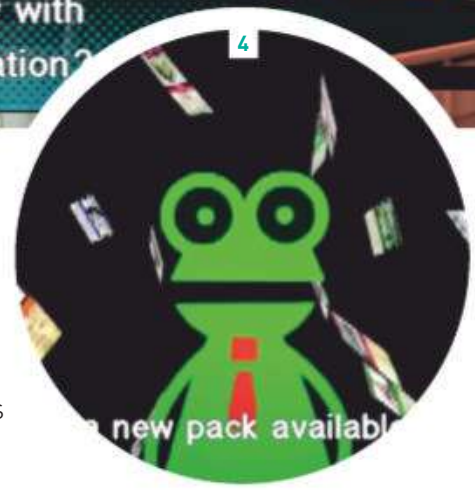


CLASSIC GAME

Metal Gear Acid 2

Oddball card-based spinoff is actually ace



1 You finally have a go with The Fury's flamethrower in this one. 2 The comic-book-style cutscenes are charming and typically melodramatic. 3 The poor grunts never stand a chance. 4 This talking frog advertises the card shop. It's that kind of game. 5 Cel shading looks lovely on PSP. We want to see it on the PS Portal screen!

The Sony executives must have been cheering, high-fiving, and celebrating by going out for frosted-tipped haircuts when they found out their new handheld PSP console would be launching with a Metal Gear game. But their frosted tips must have melted in horror when they discovered Metal Gear *Acid* has as much in common with a normal Metal Gear game as British rivers do with water that's safe to swim in. It's a top-down 3D stealth game that looks like the real thing until you try playing it. Whereupon you discover it's turn-based (!) and played with... cards?

At first it feels stiff and awkward, a needlessly slowed-down version of a stealth great. You start with a hand of six cards. Each card has a unique power or can be used as a movement card that'll let you move Snake a few spaces. For example, you can use the tranquiliser gun card to fire at an enemy, or to move to a hiding place instead because you're being stealthy/a coward. Usually you'll spend your turn weighing up whether to move Snake a little further through the level, getting him safely hidden, or to go in all-guns-blazing.

OH SNAP

The first game was fine, but the sequel really made good on the idea's promise. It makes a great first impression with lovely, colourful cel-shaded graphics that play a lot nicer with what PSP was good at. More importantly, the starting cards are far more fun. Ingeniously, the best ones are direct references to the high points in the series. You can use a Cyborg Ninja card to slash a grunt with multiple blows from an invisible assailant, or have a quick go with The Fury's ferocious flamethrower. It's a slower, more methodical stealth game that still has such cathartic action that it gets to have its cake and eat it too.

The reliance on randomised card draws is great at making you try new approaches, forcing you to engage with weapons and tools you might have ignored in previous Metal Gear games. You can lose hours fine-tuning your deck to make it a perfect hybrid of stealth and combat. As you discover, purchase, and upgrade cards, new strategies constantly present themselves. A card that permanently gives Snake an extra move each turn for the whole match is expensive but a game changer, and we love the Revolver Ocelot card that stops enemies' guns from working. Actually, hang on... is *that* how Ocelot beat us so many times in the other games?!

STRAIGHT FLUSH

It's massive too, with tons of optional missions, hidden cards, and a plot that can't resist going for the series' usual OTT stakes (a nuclear weapon threat is introduced barely four missions in). Usually in stealth games the fun grinds to a halt when you get spotted. Here it's the excuse you've been waiting for to unleash all those combat cards you've been stacking up. Good thing it has combat chops, too, because the parade of absurd super-soldiers who make up the boss fights are outstanding, even for Kojima Productions. Incredibly, the final boss even says sorry for monologuing for too long, finally giving all of us who expired of old age during Metal Gear Solid 4's cutscenes our overdue apology.

> **"A top-down 3D stealth game that looks like the real thing until you play it. When you discover it's turn-based (!) and played with... cards?"**

INFO

PUB Konami

DEV Kojima Productions

RELEASED 2006

GET IT NOW eBay, £29.95

NEED TO KNOW

1 It came with a cardboard contraption that let you view it in stereoscopic 3D.

2 You could connect it to Metal Gear Solid 3: Subsistence on PS2.

3 The Western release got ten exclusive cards, six of which were based on Metal Gear Solid 4.

Flaws? Well, the embarrassing jiggle physics on the female characters is the dictionary definition of excruciating, and sometimes the randomness of card draw can really screw you over (though this becomes less of a problem the more time you spend tuning your deck). But really, this one's major mistake is being ahead of its time. In this post-Balatro and Slay The Spire age, a new Metal Gear game with sophisticated card gameplay would be a licence to print money. Alas, it's a Konami property, and that publisher seems far too busy releasing borderline sarcastic 'remasters' of the mainline Metal Gear series to make time for Acid. A crying shame, as this console generation has finally seen Sony showing PSP the retro love it deserves. The fact we can't play this on PS Portal makes us want to kick things. Dig out your PSP from the attic (it should be under the EyeToy and the Move controllers) and treat yourself to this, a game we'd confidently call one of Snake's greatest stealth adventures. ■

DON'T DELETE

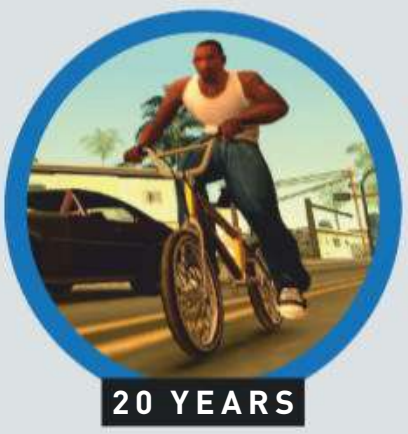
Save icons for these October moments spin in the PLAY hive mind. Do you remember this?

5 YEARS

Since we used the world's most OP pocketwatch to identify the doomed crew in Return Of The Obra Dinn. Don't be put off by the bizarre premise, for this is a near-flawless detective game that's well worth your time.

10 YEARS

A decade on from Alien: Isolation's release, we're still not over the trauma of wandering the corridors of Sevastopol Station, trying not to become lunch for the xenomorph that's stalking us. There's a new, even more immersive, Alien game coming to PSVR2 this year. Er, yay?



20 YEARS

Rockstar pushed PlayStation 2 to the absolute limit, and then even further, with the massive – and massively successful – Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas. We still miss having to use an in-game gym to stay thin. Wait, no we don't. Boo!

MEMORY CARD

Borderlands

15 years since we opened that vault

Get ready to shoot variations of this dude about five billion times.

Along with most of the world, we haven't seen the new Borderlands movie. So we've got no idea if the 10%-on-Rotten-Tomatoes-scoring blockbuster (score correct at time of writing) is any good. But we *can* tell you that the game it's based on is a fun, colourful co-op FPS that's a fine example of a loot shooter done right.

"Was going to skip it but my friends talked me into it," says reader **Carey Paypompee** "and I'm glad they did because I've had a blast with the series so far." A series that includes two sequels, a prequel (excuse us, *pre-sequel*) and two seasons of a narrative game. One great! The other... never mind!

"Wonderful game!" says **Alex Helme**, of OG Borderlands. "Loved the style of it and have probably played it through five or six times over the years. The sequel was also great, but 3 not so much." There's little consensus across our readers as to which Borderlands is best, with **Nick Paschall** believing the sequels make the first game somewhat obsolete. "It was fun for the time. I liked the randomness of the loot drops but going back after 2 and 3 is hard."

Borderlands' simple hook – team up with three friends, shoot oddballs so they'll stop quipping at you, gain better weapons/loot, and repeat – might be why the sequels are so divisive. Once Borderlands 2 nailed that winning formula, where was there to go? Still, if it's consistency you're looking for, you could do a lot worse. "These games are all fun with a buddy," says **Ricky Bridge**. "Yes, we even enjoyed 3. We are simple gamers."

"It was a unique experience and the co-op made for great memories," agrees **Alexander Wayne**."I miss when studios and consumers took more chances on new IPs." While we agree with that sentiment, be careful what you wish for. The last time Gearbox tried a new IP, we got Battleborn...

Join in the conversation as we celebrate PlayStation's past, present, and future with our community: you can email us at play@futurenet.com.

INFO

PUB 2K Games

DEV Gearbox Software

RELEASED ON PS3

RELEASE 2009

IF YOU LIKE THAT, TRY THIS...
Borderlands 2 is probably the series' peak; it's included in The Handsome Collection on PS Plus

BYTE-SIZE BITS

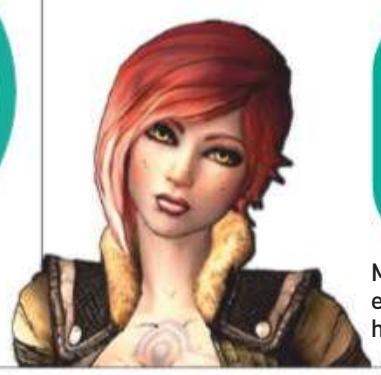
Essential numbers that add together to tell you everything you need to know about the game.

17.75m

Million varieties of gun to be found, according to Gearbox. Give us five millennia to fact-check that one.

5 billion

Times we've fantasised about destroying Claptrap.



01

Massive visual overhaul; early in development it had a more realistic look.

DEFENDING

Kainé

With a devastating backstory, Katie Wickens argues it's easy to see why Kainé is rough around the edges... and also half-naked

Kainé wasn't always the brash thug of a fighter we meet in Nier. I promise there's a very good canonical reason why she swears a lot and fights in her underwear, but we have to go back a little way to understand how her character was formed, and the totally-not-fan-service lingerie logic.

New Game+ elucidates Kainé's perspective with additional scenes about her childhood as an orphan. "In a society ruled by superstition and fear, Kainé was something to be hated, and if possible destroyed," we're told. It's heavily implied she's intersex (and confirmed by the creators); the adults of the Aerie shun her, she's ruthlessly bullied by the children, and is forced to live on the outskirts of the town. But that's not the only reason she's so wrathful.

When her grandmother takes her in, she gives Kainé a crown of Lunar Tear flowers to make her feel beautiful, and teaches her to fight to her last breath... and to swear like a sailor, so we have Grandma to thank for some of Kainé's best lines. Grandma is eventually ripped away from her in a devastating attack by a shade that would traumatise any kid. And yet, this still isn't the whole picture. Another shade, Tyrann, saves Kainé from death at the last minute, but at a cost – co-mingling inside her, he pledges to lend her his power, but with the knowledge that if she ever shows weakness he will possess her entirely. Hence her prickly personality, and why she's grown so used to killing with reckless abandon. To allow Tyrann to take over would enable much greater destruction, something she can't allow. Subsequently that's also the reason she wears such a skimpy outfit, keeping the sun on her skin and the awful shade at bay (ashamed of your words and deeds yet?).

INFO

MAIN GAMES
Nier (2010), Nier Replicant (2021)

STATS
In one alternative ending we discover Kainé is a replicant, just like the rest of the people of the Aerie.

Kainé's scarily powerful sword was originally part of a pair, the other having shattered before we meet her.

Steal her look? Kainé can unlock a 2B costume from Nier Automata in a piece of Nier Replicant DLC.

SPIN-OFFS
N/A

HOW TO PLAY?
Nier Replicant, £20 approx, Amazon

"MAYBE I'LL RIP YOUR PAGES OUT ONE BY ONE, OR MAYBE I'LL PUT YOU IN THE GODDAMN FURNACE. HOW CAN SOMEONE WITH SUCH A BIG, SMART BRAIN BE HYPNOTISED LIKE A LITTLE BITCH, HUH?"

Poor Grimoire Weiss. We know Kainé says it with love in her heart, and is thinking of Grandma's beautiful Lunar Tears.

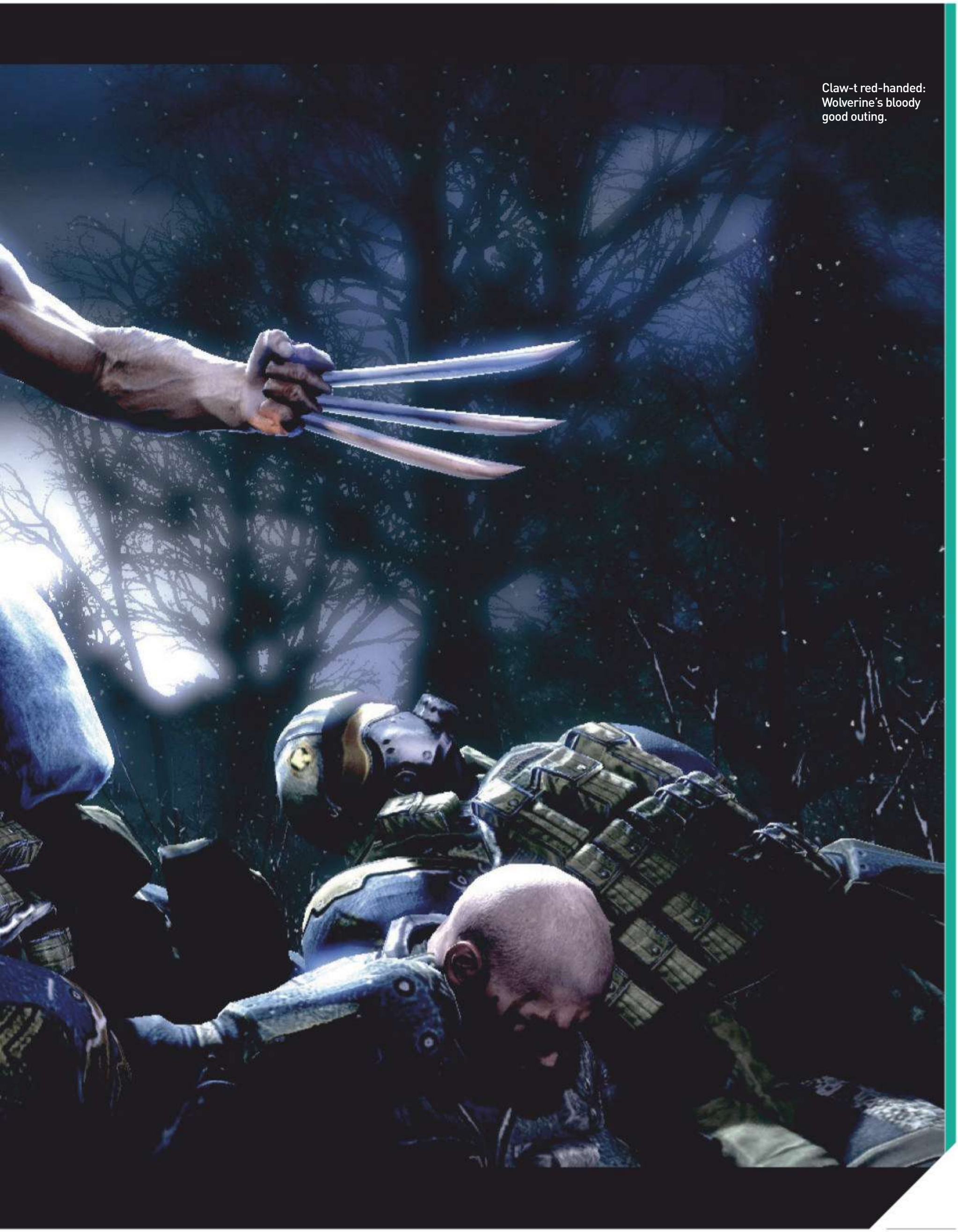
THE LIST

MOVIE MAGIC

The **movie tie-ins** good enough to be great games in their own right

'Licensed' doesn't always go hand-in-hand with 'quality'. After all, if the licence is good enough, it'll sell itself – so why bother investing properly in a game's development?

That's not the case for the games featured here, though, whose developers leveraged their licences to deliver creative and ambitious game adaptations. We're focussing here on movie tie-in games designed to complement the releases they were attached to, allowing players to extend their time in the worlds depicted on screen by playing at home, which means we're eschewing great broader licences like Alien: Isolation, and legacy tie-ins like The Thing.



Claw-t red-handed: Wolverine's bloody good outing.

Skull Island's scary in first-person.

Peter Jackson's King Kong

FORMAT PS2 / **PUB** UBISOFT
DEV UBISOFT / **RELEASED** 2005

01 This isn't just a solid adaptation of the sort-of-okay '00s remake of King Kong, this is an FPS that is startlingly ahead of the curve. A late-gen release for PS2, it feels like a blueprint for shooters to come, such as Call Of Duty: Modern Warfare and even BioShock. The extremely minimal HUD immerses you in Skull Island, forcing you to focus on survival in the moment and scramble to fire to defend yourself rather than play carefully. If anything, the Kong sections, where you bash huge rival monsters, are the parts that have aged less well, but even those are great fun. There's even an alternate ending.

Russell Crowe: 1; Tom Cruise: 0.

The Mummy Demastered

FORMAT PS4 / **PUB** WAYFORWARD
DEV WAYFORWARD / **RELEASED** 2017

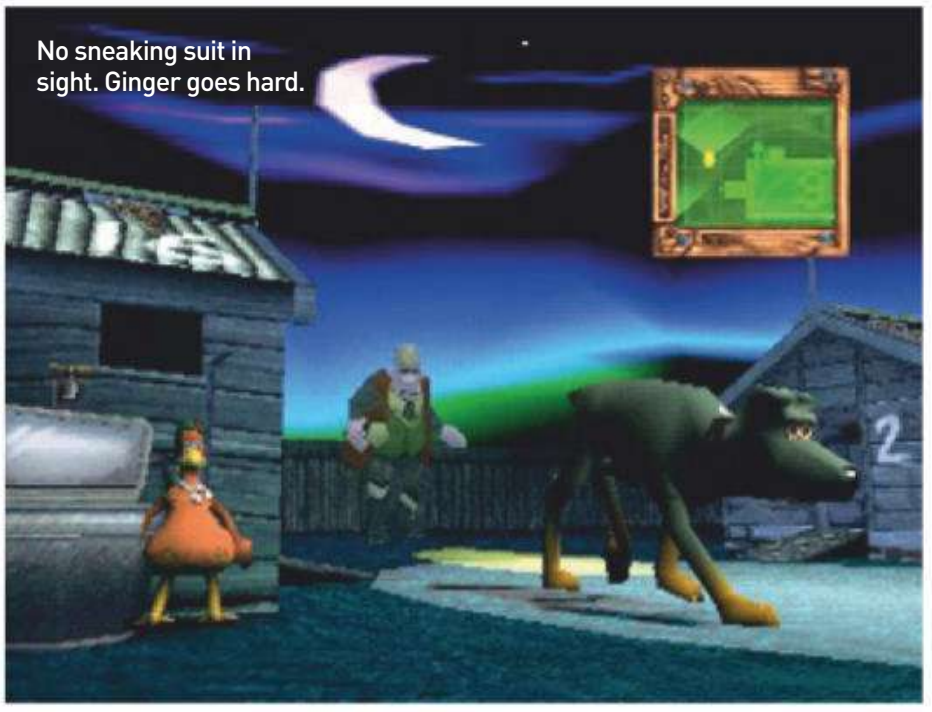
02 One of the most bizarre movie tie-ins ever, this is based on the awful remake of The Mummy starring Tom Cruise. In a demake style, this plays a bit like Castlevania (Wayforward has a terrific track record of making metroidvania games). Taking on the role of normal Prodigium soldiers, if you die, your avatar dies for good, your next life being a new soldier. You won't have the goodies you had when you copped it, either, unless you defeat your zombified former self. It has little to do with the movie, though Dr Jeykll and Princess Ahamanet feature Russell Crowe and Sofia Boutella's likenesses.

Gorgeous animation makes SPVTW:TG a joy to behold.

Scott Pilgrim Vs The World: The Game

FORMAT PS3 / **PUB** UBISOFT
DEV UBISOFT / **RELEASED** 2010

03 This side-scrolling brawler takes so many cues from Bryan Lee O'Malley's original comics that it feels cheeky to include it here, but it was released days apart from the Edgar-Wright-directed movie adaptation. To win Ramona Flowers' affections, Scott must defeat her seven evil exes – a concept perfectly suited to working your way through multiple levels bashing goons into coins until you reach a boss fight. Up to four players can join forces, changing some of the cutscenes and endings you can get. A great beat-'em-up in its own right, the devotion to capturing the source material's chaotic spirit and plenty of animation flourishes make it stand out.


No sneaking suit in sight. Ginger goes hard.

Chicken Run

FORMAT PS1 / **PUB** EIDOS INTERACTIVE
DEV BLITZ GAMES / **RELEASED** 2000

04 This adaptation of the Aardman-animated movie may be the best Metal Gear Solid game you've never played. Taking on the role of Ginger, it's your goal to help your fellow chickens escape from becoming chicken pies, just like in the movie. Unlike in the movie, this means following her every move as she fetches seemingly mundane items to build elaborate gadgets, dodging between searchlights, staying far aways from guard dogs, and hiding inside garden gnomes. There's even a rudimentary sound system that means you'll be spotted if you're not careful to move slowly across certain surfaces. You'll never look at Brussels sprouts the same way again.

For once we're on the microplastics' side

Toy Story 2: Buzz Lightyear To The Rescue!

FORMAT PS1 / **PUB** ACTIVISION / **DEV** TRAVELLER'S TALES / **RELEASED** 1999

05

Being tiny remains one of videogames' greatest fantasies to fulfil. After cowboy doll Woody is mistakenly sold to a toy collector at a car boot sale, this game focusses on Buzz's side of the story as he leads the toys to track his pal down.

Which means jumping through the locations from the movie... and beyond [*We had to* – ed]! Each stage here is based on a mundane area, from Andy's suburban house to the penthouse of the ultimate nerd, as well as back alleys and toy stores. Navigating these areas as a toy is a joy – leaping up a tree to fight a kite in a treehouse, for example, or moving across baggage check conveyor belts.

Buzz feels great to control, able to zap enemy toys with his arm laser, and deploy his wings for a satisfying extra bump to his double jump. More than mere levels to move through from A to B, each is a kind of hub filled with challenges that'll earn you Pizza Planet Tokens which, for some reason, will help you get closer to Woody's location. Naturally, only a fraction are required to beat the game, though collecting them all is a fun challenge to take on.

Each of the friendly toys will point Buzz towards the challenges of each stage, usually themed around their own personality. RC Car, for instance, will make Buzz compete in races.

A huge collectathon, Toy Story 2 is absolutely loaded with content, with levels that ooze creativity and a movement system that feels satisfying to master. It's no small feat how good this still feels to play, even if Buzz actually is quite little.

> **"Navigating as a toy is a joy – leaping up a tree to fight a kite in a treehouse, or moving across conveyor belts."**

Spider-Man 2 offered a level of freedom that felt totally unprecedented.

Spider-Man 2

FORMAT PS2 / **PUB** ACTIVISION / **DEV** TREYARCH / **RELEASED** 2004

06

Okay, we're being predictable – but Spider-Man 2 really is just that good. And, it's important to remember, this was a huge step up from the still-quite-good game of the first movie.

This was released a mere three years after Grand Theft Auto III. The concept of a fully explorable 3D open world was still novel, never mind a fully explorable version of the real-world Manhattan that went way above street level to allow you to run around the very tippy-tops of its skyscrapers. And to top it all off, the game didn't just allow you to zip around those buildings using web-physics that actually employed them as pivot points, its world was peppered with challenges that constantly required you to display a fine-tuned understanding of how you moved through it.

> **"What if Tobey Maguire's take on Spidey went web-to-smoke with Mysterio?"**

That'd be enough on its own, but here you also get to play through the best Spider-Man story committed to film – oddball Sam Raimi antics intact. Plus, new and original story arcs put movie-accurate versions of these Spider-Man characters into new situations. What if Tobey Maguire's take on Spidey (and yes, it's his voice – even if it's humorously lifeless) went web-to-smoke with Mysterio? What if he teamed up with Black Cat? The game presents the world from on screen as far bigger than the film camera could capture, and lets you play in it.

Combat is no slouch either. Though stiffer than Insomniac's modern takes, the freeform nature almost feels more expressive. There are a lot of ways to web up bad guys, and with heaps of challenging content there's always a reason to do so as well.

More fun to play through with a friend than watching the movies – no question.

Lego Star Wars: The Video Game

FORMAT PS2 / **PUB** EIDOS INTERACTIVE
DEV TRAVELLER'S TALES / **RELEASED** 2005

07 While Lego may seem like a vehicle for brand collaborations these days, back when Star Wars Episode I was released it was still a novel concept. Appealing to older diehards and newcomer kids alike, Lego models sold by the truckload. A game seemed inevitable, but it didn't come about until the run-up to Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge Of The Sith, wrapping up the prequel trilogy (and released slightly before the movie, meaning this was, weirdly, an earlier way to experience Anakin Skywalker's fiery fall). With low-stress co-op play, oodles of slapstick humour, and genuine love for the source material, this game version of the prequel trilogy was a must-have on PS2.

Remember that time Frodo merced like 100 orcs?

The Lord Of The Rings: The Return Of The King

FORMAT PS2 / **PUB** EA
DEV EA REDWOOD / **RELEASED** 2003

08 "What about gaming side by side... with a friend?" Adapting the climax to Peter Jackson's legendary trilogy of adaptations, no obsession with the epic movies was complete without tens of hours spent in this blocky rendition of Middle-earth. It features actor likenesses, and all the major set-pieces are present, including a Helm's Deep tutorial jumping off from the second movie. From there, you and a friend could hack and slash through the Fellowship's split travels across three routes. A level-up system and combos galore encouraged plenty of replay. EA Redwood worked with the film crew and special effects team Weta, ensuring a smooth process for making it accurate to the flick.

The 2D animation made it look a lot like the movie.

Disney's Action Game Featuring Hercules

FORMAT PS1 / **PUB** VIRGIN INTERACTIVE
DEV EUROCOM ENTERTAINMENT SOFTWARE / **RELEASED** 1997

09 This entry would be equally at home on a list of the Worst-Conceived Titles Of All Time. Thankfully, this poorly-named platformer is a corker. Avoiding the pitfalls of some early 3D platformers of the generation, Eurocom opted to cut this from the same cloth as the best platformers from prior console generations, Hercules leaping through tough-as-Greek-armour settings in two dimensions, but with 3D allowing stages to be layered with different routes, so you move closer to and further from the screen to progress. There's an easy mode, but (ouch) it locks you out of the end of the game.

Say hello to the birdy.

X-Men Origins: Wolverine – Uncaged

FORMAT PS3 (AND A DIFFERENT PS2 VERSION) / **PUB** ACTIVISION
DEV RAVEN SOFTWARE / **RELEASED** 2009

10 Making a movie tie-in as good as what you're basing it on is hard enough. Making it better? That's next-level. That's exactly the honour bestowed upon this adaptation of the justly maligned Wolverine prequel movie. For starters, the film – about a man with claws in hands going *blorp!*-shit – was awkwardly cut to be a cringey 12A. This PS3 version of the game, meanwhile, proudly boasts a BBFC 18 rating, thanks to a combination of extreme violence and a gnarly regeneration system that has poor Logan's skin falling to pieces as he gets hit. We're clawing at our wallets, begging for a rerelease.

PLUS POINTS

Ratchet & Clank: Size Matters

A game with big ideas and not-so-little problems

1 Armour pieces can be mixed, while full sets – such as this Wildfire armour – offer bonuses. 2 The Giant Clank shooting sections are probably the best part of the game. 3 "I thought it would be better."

Given that subtitle, you might be worried about a slew of poorly-aged jokes about the size of Ratchet's wrench, but fortunately, it isn't that sort of game. *Un*fortunately, if you're interested in playing this because you liked Rift Apart, you're in for a shock.

This is the PSP version rather than the PS2 version (as usual), but the L/R camera controls have been mapped to the right stick.[1] There are still awkward PSP legacy issues, such as impractical strafing and that weird 'press a button to enter first person while standing still' thing, but you can get through the whole game by ignoring the first and using the second only when absolutely necessary.

On paper, this should have aged wonderfully. James Arnold Taylor and David Kaye put in great performances, the action is varied, there's a wide range of weapons and armour to collect, and there are optional minigames. The main problem, really, is that almost every enemy is tankier than a giant aquarium full of Panzers that constantly plays the opening song from Cowboy Bebop.[2]

UTTER CLANKERS

From the beginning, even minor enemies can take a surprising amount of pain while they rush you. Guns level up as you use them, but only the most powerful feel close to useful. As a result, boss fights are tedious slogs that will almost certainly see you abuse the emulator's rewind feature. Imagine trying to take down a bulldozer by throwing pillows at it. Also, the bulldozer's driver has a grenade launcher and hates you.

A fever dream section early on sums the game up: great idea, with good bits lost in a flood of frustrating combat and a sense that things are dragging. Neither Ratchet nor Clank's finest hour.

INFO

PUB Sony
DEV High Impact Games
RELEASED 2007

FOOTNOTES 1 In future, we'll only mention if this *hasn't* been done. It finally seems to have become standard. **2** Which is, of course, called Tank! But you knew that, didn't you?

HAVE YOUR SAY

Readers tell us what they think of our choice

"SUCH A CLASSIC"
Alexander Wayne

"NEED A UMD READER YOU CAN PLUG INTO THE PLAYSTATION 5"
Daniel Reid

"FUTURAMA THE GAME PLS ON PS PLUS"
John Fonseca

▷ A literal blast from the past: **Timesplitters 2** comes to PS Plus!

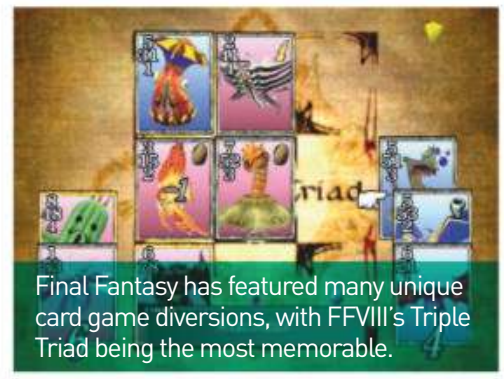
A BRIEF HISTORY OF

Card games

Drawing on our handy memory, flushing at the thought of these

Runecraft's Caesars Palace 2000 was a standout in the era when translating casino play into a game was novel.

Many RPGs have been built entirely around card battles, such as Digimon: DCB (2002), and Kingdom Hearts: Re: COM (2008)



Final Fantasy has featured many unique card game diversions, with FFVIII's Triple Triad being the most memorable.

FIFA and EA FC Ultimate Team revolve around football player cards. Cards feature in many roguelikes, like Monster Train and Slay The Spire. **Red Dead Redemption's card games kept players busy for hours.** There have even been Top Trumps videogames.

KING OF GAMES

Yu-Gi-Oh! draws close

Loads of real TCGs have been adapted, many recent ones trying to ride live service hype for big money. Our favourites are earlier experiments that put new twists on rules and balanced narratives. PS1's Yu-Gi-Oh! Forbidden Memories (2002) is tough but memorable, and PS2's Yu-Gi-Oh! The Duelists Of The Roses (2003) is (*very* loosely) based on the actual Wars Of The Roses.

OLDER **YU-GI-OH!** GAMES OFTEN CAME WITH LIMITED-EDITION CARDS, MAKING THEM VALUABLE TO COLLECTORS.

Metal Gear Acid takes Solid Snake on the go using cards to plan ahead on PSP.

PSVR2 multiplayer dungeon crawler Demeo puts your moves on your arm.

Eye Of Judgment was a short-lived PS3 card battler that used PlayStation Eye to translate physical moves into the digital world.

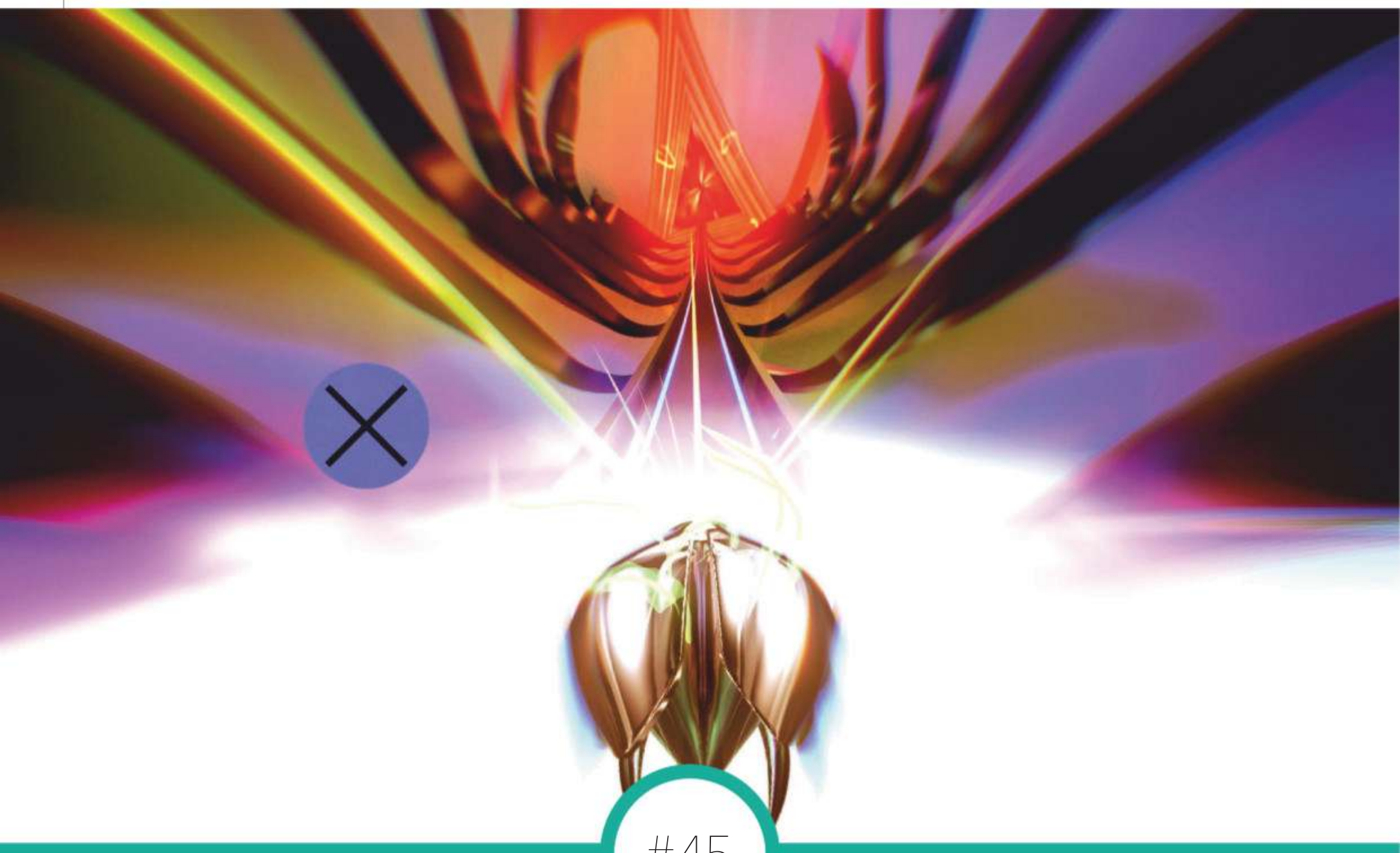
Open world games often feature card-based diversions. Few become full games, but that's just what The Witcher 3's Gwent and Thronebreaker did in 2018.

JOKER'S HIGH

Balatro goes all-in

Whether they've experienced a rainy camping holiday in Wales or not, people innately understand playing cards. Balatro's genius lies in allowing you to break those rules to chase point-scoring poker-like hands, applying game-changing jokers, tarot cards, and the like. It's the kind of joy you can only get from a digital twist on physical cards.

▷ Closing the book: the history of **videogame endings**!



#45

Facing the music

Chromium looks, violent energy, and pounding soundscapes: **Thumper**'s 1-1 is a heck of a tutorial

FORMAT PS5, PS4 / **PUB** DROOL / **DEV** DROOL / **RELEASED** 2016

You're moving so fast that the background whizzes past in an abstract smear of light and colours. Up ahead, something weird and angular and threatening looms. It twists and writhes in time to the beat, while you slide down the rail towards it at a furious pace. Suddenly, a countdown: 3, 2, 1, ⊗.

You hit the button just in time and fire a pulse of light so intense that it bends reality around it. The bolt fizzes down the rail and strikes the squirming titan, which seems to chitter in pain – a harsh, industrial rasp added to the pounding track that scores this moment.

The question that Thumper's developers seem to pose here is: just how powerful can we make a single button-press feel? How much ground-shaking, pulse-pounding energy can we condense into the act of hitting ⊗?

A few more of these atomic, on-the-beat button presses later and your giant adversary explodes into shards of polished, endlessly reflective metal. You may be less than 60 seconds into Thumper, but you already understand that this is a different breed of rhythm game. If SingStar makes you feel like you're a pop sensation, Thumper makes you feel like you're having a nightmare about a car accident.

Few games set out their stall so clearly and so quickly. As opening tracks go, Thumper's serves as a bracing statement of intent. As you hurtle into the next stage, accompanied by the fierce hammering of enormous drums, you won't want to stop listening. ■

TIME TO PLAY? Considering the intensity of everything that follows, Thumper's title screen is an oasis of relative calm. Once you start a new game, however, any sense of lingering tranquility melts away within five seconds as the momentum of stage 1-1 starts to build.

NEXT MONTH

ON SALE 15 OCTOBER

METAL GEAR SOLID DELTA: SNAKE EATER

We unbox all the secrets of gaming's sneakiest man

PLAY

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